DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 778 CS 216 960

AUTHOR Hurst, Carol Otis; Otis, Rebecca
TITLE Friends and Relations: Using Literature with Social Themes, Grades 3-5. The Responsive Classroom Series #4.
ISBN ISBN-1-892989-03-4
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 90p.
AVAILABLE FROM Northeast Foundation for Children, 71 Montague City Road, Greenfield, MA 01301. Tel: 800-360-6332 (Toll Free); Web site: <http://www.responsiveclassroom.org>.
PUB TYPE Books (010) -- Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Annotated Bibliographies; *Childrens Literature; Class Activities; Elementary Education; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Friendship; Learning Activities; *Literature Appreciation; *Novels; Picture Books; Reading Material Selection; *Social Values; Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS Theme (Literary)

ABSTRACT

This book contains eight selections of literature for children in Grades 3-5, books which focus on themes of friendship and family. Ranging from picture books to novels, these selections are rich with possibilities for exploring topics such as loyalty, empathy, conflict, courage, fairness, responsibility, and diversity. Each selection features the following: a detailed summary of the source of the selection; a variety of activities for embracing understanding; suggestions and techniques for facilitating in-depth discussions; and an annotated list of thematically related books. Selections in the book come from "The Table Where Rich People Sit" (Byrd Baylor); "The Lotus Seed" (Sherry Garland); "Shiloh" (Phyllis Reynolds Naylor); "Sarah, Plain and Tall" (Patricia MacLachlan); "Charlotte's Web" (E.B. White); "Bad Girls" (Cynthia Voigt); "Lily's Crossing" (Patricia Reilly Giff); and "Wringer" (Jerry Spinelli). (NKA)

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Friends and Relations

Using Literature with Social Themes Grades 3–5

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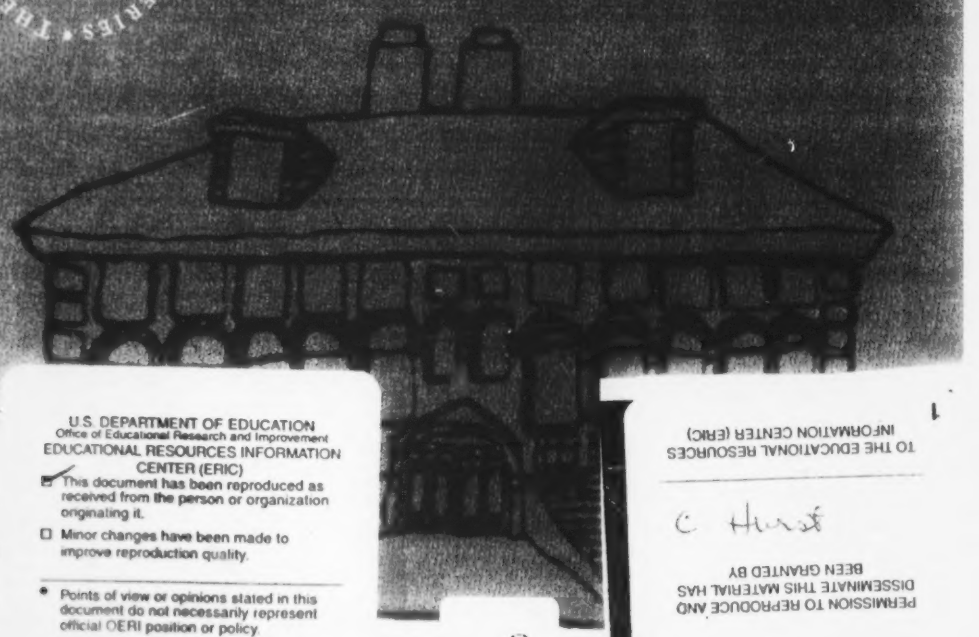

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By Carol Otis Hurst and Rebecca Otis

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Friends and Relations

Using Literature with Social Themes Grades 3–5

Carol Otis Hurst and Rebecca Otis

Northeast Foundation for Children
SINCE 1981

All net proceeds from the sale of *Friends and Relations: Using Literature with Social Themes, Grades 3–5* support the work of Northeast Foundation for Children, Inc., a nonprofit, educational foundation established to demonstrate through teaching, research, and consultation a sensible and systematic approach to schooling.

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ISBN 1-892989-03-4

Library of Congress catalog card number 99-67749

Photographs: Peter Wrenn, William Elwell

Cover and book design: Woodward Design

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05 04 03 02 01 00 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction

THE BOOKS SELECTED HERE are works of art. They range from picture books to novels written with the upper elementary audience in mind and deal with interpersonal relationships in many different ways, exploring friendship, family and such concepts as loyalty, empathy, antipathy, communication and love.

The subject of friendship and interpersonal relations appears in almost every work of literature that involves characters and story. Books which are skillfully written can open doors to discussions and activities in ways that broaden the subject and encourage readers to think about the literary relationships in terms of their own experiences. When the characters are fully developed, readers will more naturally identify with them as they face dilemmas, encounter difficulties or suffer setbacks. Relating personal experience to literary characters and events can make for lively and insightful classroom discussions as readers apply their own personal reality tests to the plot or characters.

We have explicitly avoided stories that were written for young people with particular lessons in mind, especially ones that have been ruined by excessive sentimentality or sermonizing. The author's primary purpose should be to tell a good story through well-developed characters, even when intending to explore interpersonal relationships through a story. Otherwise, most readers will dismiss the work as a lesson, missing both its literary value and its wider meaning.

Some of you may be surprised to see picture books used here as featured books and as supportive works, but it is important to use picture books in upper grade classrooms for several reasons. First, older children are the intended audience for many picture books. Gone are the days, if they were ever here, when picture books were intended for the lap set only.

Another reason is that picture books are often works of art. The best of them stand tall in the world of literature. They interpret or present a story visually as well as in text in what can be

a perfect combination. As such, they enable students to use the way of learning that suits them best.

Also, novels may take weeks to read aloud to a group. The entire class can share a picture book in much less time. Picture books can serve as stepping stones to related, longer works or stand very well on their own. Don't neglect them.

In this book we give a few suggestions and techniques for implementing book discussions in the classroom. We also examine each of our featured books carefully and at length in order to point out details, references and subtleties that might otherwise go unnoticed. The long, detailed summary of each work is not meant to replace reading the book, but it can remind the reader of details, characters or sequence before beginning a discussion.

We suggest a variety of activities for each work, many of which are designed to encourage in-depth discussions that will extend and explore the meaning and implications of the story for our own lives. A list of related books that delve into the topics raised by the featured book follows each selection.

Before you read further, a few words of warning may be in order. Overanalysis and overextension can ruin any book, regardless of how well it has been written. Keep the touch light. When students show signs of frustration with a book they previously liked, it is time to draw back a bit and let enjoyment fill the spaces.

Discussions and Activities

Most of the suggested activities in this book are intended to provoke or at least encourage discussion about personal relationships. Children may wish to share information and insights or to make connections between their own experiences and those of others in the group as well as those of characters in the reading. Discussion may turn in many directions.

Sometimes book discussions occur automatically. We read a good book and quickly turn to someone to talk to about it. Often that talk consists of a summary beginning with an evaluative sentence: "Oh, that was good!" or "That was a lousy story!" If we liked it we usually go on to tell some of the story or information

from the story, because we want the listener to be so intrigued that he or she will also read the book and then be able to discuss it with us. Those spontaneous, informal discussions are vital to a community of readers and should be encouraged and nurtured.

Useful and necessary as those discussions are, we want some literary discussions in our classrooms that go further, peering below the surface to examine plot, characterization, symbolism and theme. Such book discussions used to take place primarily in school settings. In recent years nonacademic book discussion groups among adults have become very popular, and some students may have parents who belong to a group that meets regularly to discuss a work of literature. You might like to try inviting such a group to join your class for discussion of a common book.

In the classroom, discussions frequently take the following form: The teacher asks a question designed to direct the discussion in a given way. Often the question is an open-ended one so that there can be divergent answers. Some children volunteer answers. Some children react to the comments of others by voicing agreement or disagreement. The teacher sometimes agrees or disagrees with their interpretations and sometimes evaluates them. Then the teacher asks another question and some children respond. This pattern is repeated until the well has gone dry or until the time is up.

One definition of a discussion is the oral exchange of ideas. In the activity described above, a discussion has occurred. There certainly were oral exchanges. However, many children in that classroom said nothing. They may have been shy. They may not have read the book. They may have been afraid of being wrong. They may not care about the topic. They may not even have been listening to the discussion. It was really a question-and-answer session led by the teacher with some students participating. While this is not always counterproductive, it is not as useful for extracting meaning from text as it could be.

Here are some suggestions for conducting more useful classroom discussions.

1. Don't wait until the book is finished before discussing it. Discussing a book at various points during the reading can

help students who are having difficulty and make it less likely that important elements in the book will be forgotten.

2. Make smaller groups. Nonparticipants have more difficulty hiding, and addressing just a few classmates rather than the whole class may give students courage to speak their minds.

3. Try assigning some roles for the discussion. Some students do better with structure when they can plan ahead. Before the discussion begins and with ample time for the child to prepare, assign a role to each student. Some possibilities:

   Mediator The mediator makes sure everyone has a chance to speak and that no one dominates. The mediator thinks about ways to accomplish this before the discussion begins and comes prepared with a few thoughts or questions to spur on the discussion if needed.

   Storyteller The storyteller relates what happened in the story.

   Quote collector The quote collector comes to the discussion armed with quotes, either from the book or from another source, that relate to the reading in some way.

   Background researcher The researcher has done some prior research about the time or place or has obtained some other ancillary information about the reading and shares it during the discussion.

   Connector The connector looks for connections between the reading, real life and other books or previous discussions.

   Summarizer The summarizer reviews the group's insights and feelings at the end of the discussion, usually for the whole class.

   (Do note that this structure will only work for a while. It begins to break down when the students become used to book discussions and meld various roles or discard some. As students begin to take on more than one role in the discussion, this structure may hinder or regulate the discussion too much and should be dropped. It is intended only as a beginning format.)

There are many other possible roles. If students are discussing a picture book, it is sometimes useful first to have pairs of students read it together, one focusing on the text while the other concentrates on the illustrations. Then they join together with others who have also followed this process with the same book.

4. Sometimes it helps students to bring something to the discussion beyond the book itself. In her books, including *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* (Heinemann, 1996) and *Talking About Books: Literature Discussion Groups in K–8 Classrooms* (Heinemann, 1998), Kathy Short has suggested several ways in which this can be done. Among other suggestions in those books are the following:

   Stretch and Sketch Students read the selection and draw a symbol that, to them, is applicable to the reading. They bring that drawing to the group and explain their reasoning.

   Save the Last Word for Me The students write on an index card a quote from the selection that has meaning for them. On the other side of the card the students explain the reasons why they chose that quote. In the discussion the students read and explain their quotes. The discussion ends with a rereading of the first quote.

5. Contribute but don't take over the discussion. The teacher's role in book discussions should be as the adult member of the community. Of course, the teacher has insights and suggestions that can help the discussion and should contribute as a fellow learner. It is important, however, that the teacher not take the role of all-knowing leader.

In this book, the intent of the discussions goes beyond the search for meaning in the literature to applying that meaning to our interpersonal relationships. However, the latter purpose is best undertaken after searching for meaning. Otherwise, subtleties can be ignored and the discussion suffers.

Just because we are stressing discussion and activities that entail interpersonal relationships does not mean that other subjects should be ignored. All of the books listed here touch on several topics, and it is important not to be so intent on steering

the discussion toward friends or family that we miss opportunities for discussions that take alternative routes.

Basing activities on themes in a book presents special possibilities and also challenges. Activities can promote interest in the book, inspiring other students to read it. Activities can also help a student interpret the book or provide a link between a piece of literature and other areas of the curriculum. All those are certainly desirable outcomes, but activities can also be meaningless, useless and counterproductive.

Maybe the most important thing to remember about activities based on literature is that they are not always necessary. Many times there is no logical activity that should be undertaken on the completion of a work of literature. It should not be that, having finished each book, students must pick an activity or be assigned a way to extend the book. Students may not even want to talk about it right away because they are moved, overwhelmed, thrilled or even saddened by the experience. Nothing they can "do" at such a time will deepen their understanding of the book or help them interpret it. Sometimes they will be ready for a discussion later but not right away. This is especially true of very powerful books.

If activities are undertaken, they should never trivialize the reading. They should relate to the reading in some meaningful way. And whenever possible, students should be given a wide range of choices as to which, if any, activity to undertake.

The activities suggested on the following pages are meant to be picked over carefully, with many being discarded as inappropriate at any given time while others are adopted and adapted to suit the needs of the group. The explanation for using any activity ought to be that, given this group of students and their needs at this time, this activity makes sense.

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The Table Where Rich People Sit

by Byrd Baylor

Illustrated by Peter Parnall

Scribners, 1994 ISBN 0 684 19653 0

Comments

The Table Where Rich People Sit is a beautiful picture book which allows us to think about the things we really value in our lives. Baylor writes eloquently in a deceptively simple manner and Parnall's illustrations wrap beautifully around the words, his landscapes blending into the white space of the page and his human and animal figures melding with the landscape. Desert shades of yellows and browns dominate the book. The tone of the text is light and at times quite funny, but the subject, one family's value system, is more serious.

This book can, of course, lead to investigations and discussions about work and working conditions or about life in the desert, but our purpose here is to discuss family and this book presents an interesting picture of one family's life style.

Detailed Summary

In *The Table Where Rich People Sit*, we see the table first. On the page before the title page, the table stands beside a cloven desert rock and appears to be carved from that rock. Our narrator is Mountain Girl. We first see her on the title page as she sits at the table, peering out of a window at the moonlit sky over the desert.

As the narration begins we see the family as they gather around the table. Mountain Girl tells us that the table sits in their kitchen. Her parents made the table from scrap lumber and everyone, including Mountain Girl, likes it just fine. However, she explains to us that you can tell by looking at it that it did not come from a furniture store—it isn't a table where rich people sit.

Our next perspective allows us to peer down at the table. Seated around it now are men wearing crowns and headdresses. One is reaching for a cookie from a blue flowered plate in the middle of the irregularly shaped table. Mountain Girl explains that her parents think the world's rulers could solve their arguments in half the time if they gathered together around such a table to talk and eat cookies together. Now, however, it is Mountain Girl and her family who are gathered around the table for a meeting she has called to discuss money. She says they don't have enough of it.

We get a larger scope of the landscape on the next page, which shows the family driving toward us in their rattletrap truck. On a hill above the canyon a coyote peers down at the family's truck. Mountain Girl explains that she wants her parents to develop a little more ambition, perhaps taking more lucrative jobs so that they could have better clothes and nicer possessions. Her parents, we learn, insist on taking only outdoor jobs where they can work together.

A horse's face is part of the landscape on the next page. Mountain Girl explains that her parents are willing to work very hard at their numerous outdoor jobs, including breaking wild horses. Her mother is stooped in the illustration, apparently picking squash. Their daughter suggests that they could make more money working in a building in town, but her father says that their number one rule is that they have to see the sky. Her retort, "You could look through a window," is ignored.

The sun is rising in a yellow and orange sky between two mountains in the next illustration, which shows her mother and father holding her up when she was just eight minutes old to see the mountain at sunrise. She explains that it was the most magical, beautiful mountain her parents had ever climbed, and they wanted it to be her first sight. They've called her Mountain Girl.

The next page has a different color scheme with blue and green waving lines curving around the previous yellows and browns. She explains that her brother is called Ocean Boy because her parents held him up to see the place where jungle touches ocean in a purple-blue night sky for his first sight.

Those blues have faded on the next page. The father is maintaining that the family is rich and he will prove it by describing all the money they earn in a year. Mountain Girl will act as bookkeeper, tracking their income in a list. They do not, her mother explains, usually take their money in cash; they get paid in time and in sunsets, something worth twenty thousand dollars. Mountain Girl records that number.

The next page shows us the blues, greens and purples of the canyon. Her mother says she should change that figure to thirty thousand because it is worth the extra amount to hear coyotes in the hills. In fact, she should add another five thousand because of their ability to watch the mountains change colors ten times a day. Mountain Girl now has written thirty-five thousand dollars.

On the next page the little girl's eyes are fully open, and they stare straight at us over a cactus in full flower. Her head is drawn in an angular manner, almost rock-like, and except for those eyes she is featureless. She has increased the numerical figure by five thousand dollars because that is how much her father values seeing a cactus bloom.

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Birds appear within the lines of her father's call on the next page, and we are told that he loves to mimic bird calls and that he needs to add another ten thousand for having both day and night birds around them.

At first glance the next page appears to show a large cat behind a mountain outcropping. Closer examination shows the mountain to be made up of the cat, a whale, a bear and a coyote. The text describes the many lists the girl has made, including one of all the animals each member of her family has seen and the ones they most want to see in the wild. The family feels that as a list maker, she is worth about a million dollars. In fact, each family member is worth a million dollars, so she now writes four million fifty thousand dollars on her paper.

The narrator doubts that she's really worth a million dollars, but as she thinks about how she values her surroundings, she decides to add five thousand for the pleasure of wandering around freely in the desert canyons. Her brother wants to add seven dollars for the pleasure of sleeping outdoors under the stars. The family suggests five thousand dollars would more accurately reflect the value of that pleasure. Our narrator, however, has begun to realize that cash and numbers are not very important when you are adding up riches. So the meeting ends.

Her mother, father and brother become tiny silhouettes in a vast expanse of sky and mountain on the next page. The text tells us that they have gone outside to watch the sliver of a moon, but Mountain Girl is still seated at the nice homemade table, eating a cookie and writing a book about them, which she will call *The Table Where Rich People Sit*. We have come full circle.

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- Read other picture books by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnall. Discuss whether any seem to be conveying the same theme as *The Table Where Rich People Sit*.
- Make lists with the class:

  List the items the family in the book values.

  Encourage each child to list the things he or she values most

in life that have little or no monetary value. Children might prioritize the items on the list from most to least valuable in their lives. Ask children to estimate what each member of their families would value most. Then have them check with each family member and amend the list.

Make class value lists—aspects that the individual classroom members value most about their school community.

- Create value chests. Everyone in the class places small items that represent things or experiences in their lives that they value in a basket, box or some other container. Give each person a turn over a period of days to share his or her value chest. After each value chest sharing, have students write a paragraph about things they now know about the person who shared that they did not know before.
- Find and bring in objects or photographs of objects made by hand by various family members. Talk about the reasons these are valued possessions.

Thematically Related Books

Picture Books

Agee, Jon. *The Incredible Painting of Felix Clousseau*. Farrar, 1988. ISBN 0 374 33633 4.

Society's values are up for ridicule in this allegorical picture book in which an artist's paintings come to life.

Calhoun, Mary. *Flood*. Morrow, 1997. ISBN 0 688 13919 1.

The Mississippi flood of 1993 is the backdrop for this exploration of family values. When the water overtakes a home and one has only minutes to evacuate, what things are important enough to rescue?

Lionni, Leo. *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse*. Knopf, 1969. ISBN 0 394 82911 5.

Although this picture book was written with a younger audience in mind, it does a nice job of reducing values to a simple level—is it better to be alive and vulnerable than it is to be artificial and safe?

Novels

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Shiloh*. Atheneum, 1991. ISBN 0 440 40752 4.

This Newbery Award winner, described in detail later in this book, is the first in a series of novels about Shiloh. This one is particularly strong in its exploration of family values, as the protagonist, Marty, must decide whether the greater good is served by lying to his parents in order to save an abused animal.

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The Lotus Seed

by Sherry Garland

Illustrated by Tatsuro Kiuchi

Harcourt, 1993 ISBN 0 15 249465 0

Comments

This beautifully simple book tells of one family's history and tradition. Its tone is understated, and the reader must imagine the emotion behind each simple statement.

It touches upon ancient history, the culture and war in Vietnam, immigration and the adjustment to a new way of life. An author's note at the conclusion explores some of the history of Vietnam's imperial throne. All of these make good extensions for this picture book, but our focus here will be on the family tradition and heritage.

Detailed Summary

The cover shows us Asian workers in what might be a rice field. Sharply peaked mountains line the horizon. In front of the mountains stand thatch-roofed buildings and palm trees.

The formal frontispiece highlights a single pink lotus blossom standing out against several others. In the background against a sunset, we can make out some of the same mountains as on the cover and a distant palace.

As the narration begins we see the young emperor in formal dress standing alone and covering his eyes, his head bowed. In the background is a palace. The text states that the narrator's grandmother, Bá, saw the emperor cry the day he left the throne.

On the next page we see the grandmother as a young woman kneeling at the edge of a lotus-filled body of water plucking a seed. The text tells us that she is taking a lotus seed from the River of Perfumes at the Imperial Garden. She does this to have something with which to remember the emperor. In a darkened,

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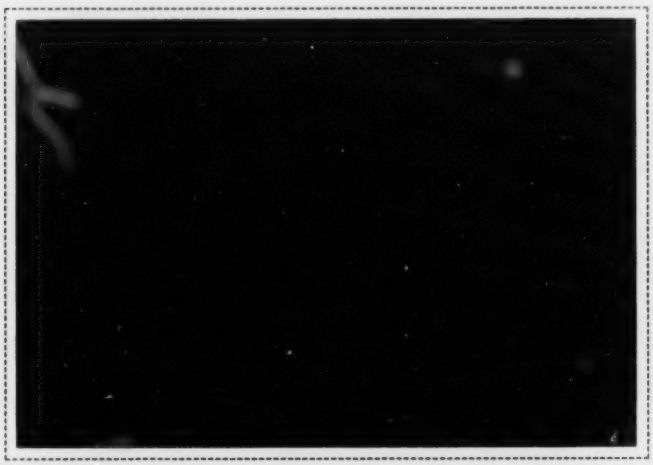
simply furnished room, we see Bá place something under a simple altar. The text tells us that it is the seed, wrapped in silk, which she would take out whenever she was sad or lonely.

Bá stands with a young man on the next page, wearing a red dress and a draped white headpiece. Both she and the young man are looking down at something she holds in her hand. We are told that theirs was an arranged marriage, and that when he went off to war, she raised their children alone.

On the following page Bá holds a young boy by the hand as they run across a war-torn landscape. She has left her fine combs behind, but she carries the lotus seed with her. The next double-page spread is chaotic. The sky is black and a storm tosses a crowded boat. Bá silently says good-bye to her country.

Next we look down from a great height at a city crowded with buildings and hundreds of lights. We do not see Bá, but we are told that she has arrived where people speak a language unknown to her. The following illustration shows a family working together in a kitchen with bare windows, and we learn that she and her children, her sisters and her cousins all live together in a big house.

Now a young boy appears. It is night, and he walks away from the house with its lit windows. The text tells us that he is



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Bá's grandson and that he has been very curious about that lotus seed. He has taken it from beneath the family altar and planted it in a pool of mud. Bá is seated on the next page, crying over the loss of the precious seed. Her young grandson has forgotten where he planted it.

A pink lotus in full bloom dominates the next illustration, and we learn that Bá is overjoyed, for the seed was still fertile. She says, "No matter how ugly the mud or how long the seed lies dormant, the bloom will be beautiful." When the blossom fades and turns into a pod, Bá gives lotus seeds to all her grandchildren and keeps one herself with which to remember the emperor.

Our narrator kneels by her bedside table, placing something in the drawer. The text shows that she has wrapped her grandmother's seed in a piece of silk and hidden it someplace special. Someday she will plant it and give the seeds to her own children.

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- The lotus seed is a symbol of the past, the culture Bá had to leave, and of the future, because the narrator expects to pass on future seeds to her children. Discuss what might have happened if Bá had taken her beautiful combs instead of her seed as she ran from her home.
- Talk about what it must feel like to leave a place that is familiar and go to a new country where the language or the customs are strange. Try imagining with the class how an immigrant's first day in the United States might seem. Discuss with the students what aspects they think would delight, upset or frighten them.
- Interview a family that has come to this country within the last generation to learn about their memories and the items they treasure from their past.
- Compare this book with *The Keeping Quilt*, in which a quilt is passed from generation to generation. Look at *Yonder* by Tony Johnston, in which a family tradition is to plant a tree to commemorate important events. Find students whose families

share similar treasures or traditions and ask them to describe those to their classmates.

- Read and share Sherry Garland's picture book, *My Father's Boat,* in which a boy accompanies his father, a shrimp fisherman, for a day of work. The family is Vietnamese American, and as they work the father tells the boy of his own father, still in Vietnam, who is also a shrimp fisherman. In this book there are brief allusions to the land of Vietnam, but the thrust is that of a trade handed down from one generation to the next.
- Ask children to bring in an object or a photograph of an object that has been handed down in their family for at least one generation. Have them tell the others about it and why it is important to their family.
- Some things that are passed on in families are not material objects or even customs. Some families pass on stories, songs or sayings. Students might want to ask their own families about customs, stories, songs or sayings passed down through their families. Allow children to share the stories and make a class book of these traditions.
- Have children invent a tradition—some object, song, story or deed that they would like to pass on to their children some day. Discuss why it has meaning for them. How will they convey that meaning to their children?

Thematically Related Books

Picture Books

Bunting, Eve. *I Have an Olive Tree.* HarperCollins, 1999. ISBN 0 04 0275731.

Our narrator, Sophia, is given an olive tree by her grandfather. The problem is that the tree stands in the backyard of his home on a small Greek island, and they are in America. Although she thanks him, the gift has no meaning for Sophia. Then her grandfather dies, and part of his legacy is a pair of airline tickets to Greece for Sophia and her mother. He has also requested that she hang her grandmother's beads on the

olive tree. Getting to the small island off the coast of Greece takes some doing, and by the time she hangs the beads on the tree, Sophia understands what it means.

Garland, Sherry. *My Father's Boat*. Orchard, 1998. ISBN 0 531 30073 0.

A boy accompanies his father for a day of work on his shrimp boat in this book.

Johnston, Tony. *Yonder*. Dial, 1988. ISBN 0 8037 0277 9.

A family plants a tree to commemorate important events.

Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. Simon & Schuster, 1994. ISBN 0 671 64963 9.

In this story a quilt is passed from generation to generation.

Say, Allen. *Tree of Cranes*. Houghton, 1991. ISBN 0 395 52024 X.

The author recalls misbehaving and angering his mother when he was growing up in Japan, and then being distressed because she has dug up his pine tree from the garden and brought it inside. She then decorates the tree to share her Christian heritage with him.

Novels

Hurmence, Belinda. *A Girl Called Boy*. Clarion, 1982. ISBN 0 395 55698 8.

This is a time-travel book in which a character disdains her heritage and is transported back in time to see it more clearly. In this case African American Blanch is annoyed by her father's frequent references to their slave ancestry until she is transported back in time.

Yolen, Jane. *The Devil's Arithmetic*. Puffin, 1990. ISBN 0 14 034535 3.

Like Blanch in *A Girl Called Boy*, Hannah resents and is embarrassed by her family's traditions and what seems to her to be their preoccupation with the Holocaust, until she is transported back to that time. She steps into 1940 Poland and becomes a victim herself.

Shiloh

by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Yearling, 1991 ISBN 0 440 40752 4

Comments

Shiloh and its sequels deal with ethics, animal abuse, villainy and love. Although the book is not technically difficult to read, the abuse and violence directed at the dog evoke powerful emotions. Care should be taken to provide an alternative selection for some readers.

The question of whether or not lying to one's parents is ever justified is, of course, a big issue. The idea that ethics may have shades of gray may be a new concept for some readers and should lead to lively debate.

Detailed Summary

A foreword in some editions of *Shiloh* explains that Naylor was inspired to write this book after finding an abused beagle in the woods of West Virginia. Friends in West Virginia later adopted the dog and named it Clover.

The story is told in the present tense by Marty, a young boy in a West Virginia mountain family. We first meet the family at Sunday dinner, eating a rabbit shot by Marty's father. Marty has difficulty eating it because he does not know whether it died instantly. Although his father assures him that it did, Marty leaves the table.

Marty walks out of the house with his .22 rifle, but he intends to shoot an apple off the tree or tin cans on a rail, not an animal. It is on this walk that Shiloh makes his first appearance. He does so tentatively, letting himself be seen but not allowing Marty to touch him. The dog cringes as though it has been abused, following Marty but not approaching him until Marty whistles. Then the dog comes quickly, full of joy. He now begins to follow Marty closely, interacting with him at every opportunity.

Marty realizes that the dog is about to follow him home, and that presents problems. He is not allowed to own pets because his family hasn't enough money to feed and care for them properly. At his front door, Marty tells the dog to go home, and it slinks off but does not go far away, watching Marty's house from the nearby bushes. Marty names him Shiloh because that's the area where he has found him.

Marty's father thinks the dog must belong to Judd Travers, a neighbor. After a supper of leftover rabbit, Marty's father decides to take the dog back to Travers, despite Marty's objections. Marty sneaks an egg out of the hen house to feed the dog—the first of his many deceptions in the book.

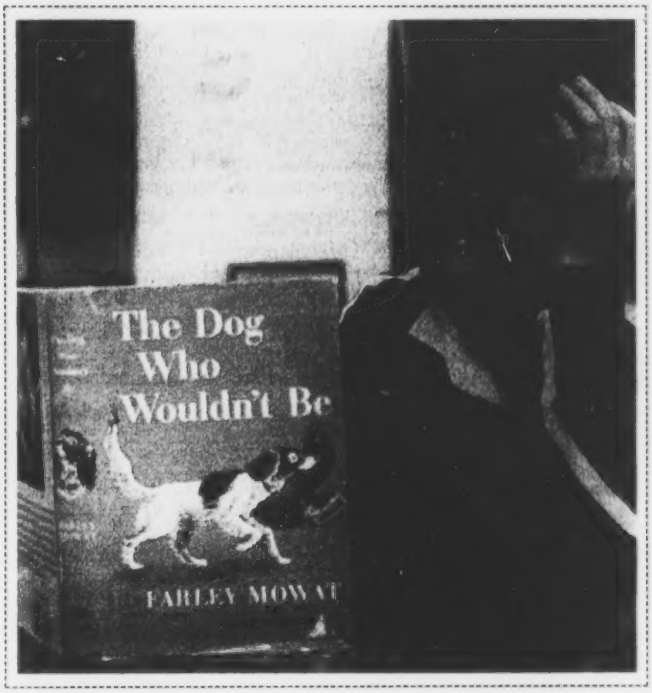
On the ride over to Judd's, Marty tells his father that he'd like to be a veterinarian, but his father deflates his ambition by pointing out how much money it would cost to go to college. Marty will have to be content with the lesser ambition of being a vet's helper.

We learn more about Judd Travers through Marty's thoughts on the ride to Travers's house. Marty once watched Travers cheat the proprietor of a store. Marty protested at the time, but to no avail. Ever since that time Travers has aimed his tobacco spit at Marty's feet. Marty also knows that Judd poaches deer. As they get near Judd's house, the dog begins to tremble.

Marty tries again to make his case with his father. Shouldn't he report animal abuse to someone? His father says it's not their business. Marty says his father would care if the dog were a child, but his father will have none of it. This is an animal, not a human being, and that ends the conversation.

Judd's other dogs bark when the Jeep drives into the yard. Marty insists on making sure the dog is Judd's. We get a little sense of the customs of the area from the conversation that Ray Preston, Marty's father, has with Judd on the doorstep: An exchange of pleasantries occurs before they get down to business. The dog does belong to Judd, who greets the animal with angry words and a kick. Marty protests, but Judd will do as he pleases.

After a sleepless night, Marty decides to buy Shiloh from Judd, although he doesn't know how he will earn enough money.



Marty's father is a mail carrier serving a wide mountain area. Marty consults him about earning some money, but his father only suggests collecting bottles and cans. His father offers to take Marty on his mail route the next day to help deliver the heavy Sears Roebuck Catalog. Marty jumps at the chance, since he may find some more bottles and cans on the route.

During that evening his sisters catch lightning bugs in jars, and seeing the bugs imprisoned in the jar reminds Marty of Shiloh. Marty insists that they let the bugs go.

On the mail route the next day, we get a fuller picture of Marty's father. He stops to chat with the people at their mailboxes even when he has no mail for them. They're fond of him and often leave cakes or bread in their mailboxes for him.

Marty is apprehensive as they approach Travers's place. Travers is cutting weeds near his mailbox. Marty looks but does not see Shiloh. Ray Preston engages Judd in conversation about

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his dogs. When Judd says he keeps them half starved so they'll hunt better, Marty's father tells him he should keep them healthy or he won't have them long. Judd is not receptive to such subtleties, however. He tells them that last night he punished the dog by not feeding him and by making him watch the others eat. Marty tells him the dog's name is Shiloh. Judd gives him a look to show him how he feels about that.

Marty's father is disturbed by Marty's behavior. On the way home he tells Marty that he has no right to tell a man what to call his dog. Then they talk about the new game warden, who, it is said, is enforcing the hunting laws about shooting animals out of season. Marty worries about Judd shooting Shiloh. We also learn more about the financial status of Marty's family. Although his father has a job, any extra money the family earns goes toward paying for the care of his father's mother. The family lives sparely with no extra food or money for a dog.

Soon after, Marty hears a noise outside that he knows is Shiloh. He takes his unfinished lard and jam sandwich and goes outside. Marty resolves not to take Shiloh back to Judd's house this time. He will hide the dog. He builds him a pen on a nearby hill with fencing material from their shed and feeds Shiloh his sandwich and, later, some potato and cornbread before leaving him for the night.

The next morning he ties a rope around Shiloh's neck and the two go for a run through the hills. The lie Marty tells his father that night is one of omission. He connives to keep some of his dinner uneaten claiming that he will eat it later.

Shiloh has been remarkably quiet, only uttering soft yips. Marty arrives back home in time to see Judd pull into the yard looking for his dog. He states that on finding Shiloh he will whip him and starve him. Marty's father protests. Marty tries to avoid lying when confronted. No, he did not see Shiloh in the yard. No, he did not see Shiloh on the road. When Judd tells him he must bring Shiloh to him if he sees him, Marty cannot say that he will. When his father asks if Marty heard Judd, he nods, a response which both men take as an answer to the earlier question.

That night Marty remembers a time when he ate his sister's

candy and refused to admit it. His mother told him that although she didn't know who did it, Jesus did know. Later Marty had confessed. He thinks now that skirting the truth the way he did with Judd was lying. Convinced that Jesus would not want a dog to be hurt, Marty justifies his feelings about lying to Judd. Lying to parents, however, is a different matter.

The next day Marty's parents urge him to see more of his friend, David Howard, and suggest he call David. Marty is afraid to bring David here to the hills lest he discover Shiloh. Marty lies again to his parents when he makes excuses for not asking David to come.

He decides instead to go visit David. As he is walking to David's house, Judd passes and offers Marty a ride in the truck. While driving, Judd mentions that he bought Shiloh for thirty-five dollars. Marty tells Judd that if he treated the dog better, he wouldn't run off. Judd reveals to Marty that he was often beaten as a kid. This is the first information we have that suggests why Judd behaves the way he does.

Marty lies to David about the reason why David can't return his visit. At lunch Marty eats every morsel of the meal, which strikes him as lavish, and he accepts Mrs. Howard's offer of a sandwich for the way home. Marty has misgivings as he asks for more food but justifies his lies by saying, "A lie don't seem a lie anymore when it's meant to save a dog, and right and wrong's all mixed up in my head."

On his way home Marty stops at the store to buy leftover food with the fifty-three cents he has collected with his cans and bottles, knowing that the grocer thinks the food is for his family. He thinks about his grandmother telling him that liars can't go to heaven. He feels momentary regret until he remembers that, according to her, animals don't go to heaven either.

Marty has sheltered Shiloh for more than a week and is playing with him in his pen when his mother finds him. Her reaction is slightly sympathetic, and Marty pleads his case. He says, "Well, what kind of a law is it, Ma, that lets a man mistreat his dog?" She explains that she must tell Marty's father about the dog. If she did not, she says, he wouldn't be able to trust her again. She

tells Marty that she'll hold off telling her husband about Shiloh for twenty-four hours.

Marty is partly relieved that his mother shares the secret but he is worried about devising a plan to save the dog within such a short time. He debates giving the dog to someone else without revealing whose dog it is but discards that idea as dishonest.

That night Marty's secret is revealed. Alerted by yelps of pain from the pen, Marty and his father find that a German shepherd has leapt the fence and attacked Shiloh. His father picks up Shiloh and puts him on gunnysacks in the rear of the Jeep. Marty fears he's taking him back to Judd. Instead his father drives to the doctor for help, saying they will pay for treatment. The doctor protests that he is not a vet but tends the dog's wounds anyway. Marty tells the truth about Shiloh when queried by the doctor. They leave the dog at the doctor's.

On the way home his father wants to know what else he is unaware of that Marty has done. He asks, "How do I know that's not another lie?" When Marty asks what his father would have wanted him to do, his father says he must do what's right. Marty's retort, "What's right?" stumps his father for a moment. Then he says that you go by the law, and if the law isn't right, you work to change it. Marty's father agrees to let him care for Shiloh, if he lives, until he is well enough to return him to Judd.

That night Marty hears his mother and father arguing and feels guilty. Later that day, David discovers Shiloh's empty pen. Threatening him with a terrible fate if he tells anyone, Marty tells David the whole story. He feels he and David will now be friends for life after sharing his secret.

When Doc Murphy brings Shiloh home, Marty swears that he will pay the doctor's bill himself. The whole family takes to the ailing dog as he recuperates in Marty's house, although only the children talk about him.

Alerted by the doctor, Judd comes to the house and finds Shiloh. Marty's mother offers to buy Shiloh, but Judd says he wants his dog back by the following Sunday. Now Marty knows he has the support of his family and friends, but that doesn't change what he must do. He resolves to confront Judd and tell

him he cannot give Shiloh back to him. As he approaches Judd's house, he witnesses Judd shooting a doe out of season. Judd lies to Marty about the deer. Marty offers a trade: He will keep Shiloh and will keep Judd's deer shooting a secret. Marty tells himself he's no better than Judd; he's willing to do anything to get what he wants. The deal is not that easy. Judd wants forty dollars for the dog and will let Marty work for him for the money—two dollars an hour for twenty hours. Marty agrees and makes Judd put the deal in writing.

Marty's parents are pleased by his bargain with Judd, although Marty does not tell them about seeing Judd shoot the deer. This presents another dilemma for Marty. He has promised Judd not to tell anyone about the deer, but not telling his parents is to lie by omission. Marty wonders if what someone does is ever everybody's business.

Judd makes the work hard for Marty. He gives him difficult jobs and insists that they be done perfectly. Judd sits in the shade, drinking and watching Marty work. At first Judd offers no comfort to Marty as he works, although one day he leaves a jar of water out for him and another day asks Marty to sit with him in the shade. He and Marty talk a bit about dogs, but Marty is afraid to say too much, lest he offend Judd.

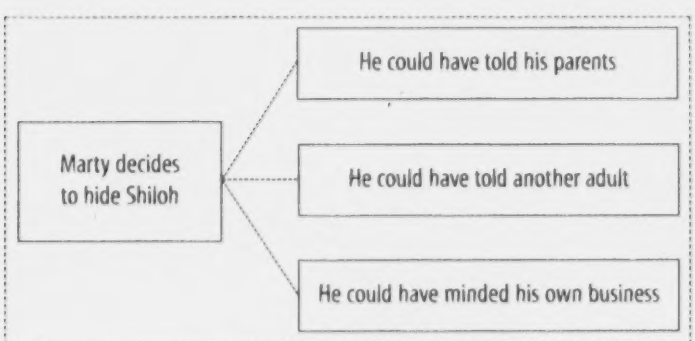
Judd ridicules Marty for working so hard and claims that the bargain they made was not witnessed and therefore is unenforceable. Marty sees no alternative but to fulfill his side of the bargain, although he continues to worry that Judd will not fulfill his part of the bargain. Hints about Judd's background filter through their porch conversations. On the last day, after Marty finishes his work, Judd offers him an old collar for Shiloh, and their bargain is fulfilled.

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- We know about Marty's feeling for animals before Shiloh comes into the picture. Ask students to talk about how we know this.
- Discuss what is meant by a "white lie." What would happen if students spoke only the absolute truth for one day? Ask the

class to write about what they think would happen if they did. It might be helpful to have the class role-play a conversation between two friends in which each speaks the absolute truth even though it might be hurtful.

- Marty thinks that he and David will be friends for life after sharing the information about Shiloh. Discuss why this has made a difference in their friendship.
- Marty says that, by making the bargain with Judd not to tell about his shooting the deer out of season, he has made life harder for other deer. Discuss the other possible outcomes of this action.
- Marty's mother shows, at many points in the story, how aware she is of Marty's feelings. Ask the class to locate the places in the story where this is most evident.
- Look for ways in which members of this family support and care for each other. Decide what this family values most. If the family held different values—for instance, if they did not value honesty—how might Marty have behaved differently?
- The community in this story has a particular set of values. For instance, they try not to interfere in each other's lives. Ask students to compare their community or neighborhood with the one in Shiloh.
- Make a list of the decisions, both good and bad, that Marty makes. Chart those decisions in a way that shows his alternatives for each decision. Your chart might look like this:


Marty decides to hide Shiloh
He could have told his parents
He could have told another adult
He could have minded his own business

- Have students extend the chart further by indicating what the possible results could be for each alternative.
- Find the area on a map in which Shiloh is set. How high are the mountains? Look at a road map and examine how many cities, villages and roads are in that region. How large is the population? Discuss how these geographical factors might influence life in the Appalachians.
- Find each lie that is told in the book. Remind students as they search that not all of the lies are told by Marty. For each of Marty's lies, talk about what alternatives he had. Discuss with students how they think they would have behaved under those circumstances. Teachers might ask students to list reasons why they think people lie. The class could then compare lists and rewrite them to be more inclusive or more specific.
- This story is written in first person, present tense. Try changing a page or a paragraph from Shiloh into third person, past tense. What is the effect? Discuss with the students how they would have written it if they were writing the story. What if the author had chosen to write this story from Judd's point of view instead of Marty's? What events would seem different? What explanations would Judd give for his actions and reactions?
- Make a list of all the characters in this book. Decide whether or not, during the action of the book, the characters changed at all and, if so, how they changed and what caused each change. For instance, by the end of the story Marty has changed a lot, but so has Judd. Both people changed because of Shiloh, of course, but they also changed because of the conversations they had.

Thematically Related Books

Novels

Armstrong, William H. *Sounder*. HarperCollins, 1969. ISBN 0 06 020143 5.

Sounder is the family pet and the symbol of survival for this family of sharecroppers at the turn of the century. The father is arrested for stealing food for his family.

Cottonwood, Joe. *Danny Ain't*. Scholastic, 1992. ISBN 0 590 45067 0.

Danny, too, must make choices. He lives alone in a trailer while his father is hospitalized for post traumatic stress syndrome. He identifies with the coyotes who seem able to take the food and leave the poison. In spite of his many temptations, Danny chooses a lawful and ethical existence.

Gardiner, John R. *Stone Fox*. HarperCollins, 1983. ISBN 0 690 03983 2.

Family values come into play here as a boy and his dog enter a race against Stone Fox, a Native American. Each has a justified and admirable reason to win.

Henkes, Kevin. *Protecting Marie*. Greenwillow, 1995. ISBN 0 688 13958 2.

Twelve-year-old Fanny has a moody and demanding father, who once brought her a puppy and then took it away. Now he has brought her another dog, Marie, but she hesitates to trust him again.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Shiloh Season*. Aladdin, 1999. ISBN 0 689 82931 6.

This book starts one month after the first book ends. Judd still wants Shiloh back, and when Marty sees Judd drunk and hunting on the Preston property, his fears for Shiloh's life are renewed. Then Shiloh saves Judd's life.

Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds. *Saving Shiloh*. Aladdin, 1999. ISBN 0 689 81461 5.

Judd has stopped drinking and become less hostile, although he is suspected in some robberies and in a murder. Marty has defended Judd to his classmates, although he's not sure he's right. This time it's Judd who saves Shiloh.

Rawls, Wilson. *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Bantam, 1984. ISBN 0 553 27429 5.

The mountain setting for this book is the Ozarks rather than the Appalachians, but the story of Billy and his dogs has parallels to *Shiloh*.

Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan. *The Yearling*. Aladdin, 1988 ISBN 0 02 044931 3.

This is a longer and more sophisticated book than *Shiloh*, but there are many similarities in this tale of a boy's love for his pet deer and the difficult ethical decisions he must make.

Sarah, Plain and Tall

by Patricia MacLachlan

HarperCollins, 1985 ISBN 0 06 0241018

Comments

This small novel is an almost perfect book. The spare prose echoes the strong people it presents and the spare land on which they live. The size and simplicity of the story make it available to readers of varying skills, and yet the book provides good material for character study. It is useful for studying family because it deals with a stepparent being introduced into a tight family group. The time setting is vague but probably sometime near the turn of the century. The fact that the book is set in the past makes it clear that stepfamilies are not a recent invention, and the problems these children, their new stepmother and their father face may not differ markedly from those of many of the readers.

Detailed Summary

The book itself is small and slightly taller than it is wide, so the title words "plain and tall" take on reality from the moment we pick up the book. The cover is illustrated with a pencil sketch in which a woman is cutting a boy's hair. Over her shoulder a smiling young girl looks on. A cat sleeps on the lowest step of the stoop on which they sit.

We open with a question from the young boy: "Did Mama sing every day?" From that question we know that Mama is no longer with them and that the questioner probably didn't know her very well. The next paragraph shows that he has asked his big sister this same question many, many times and has always received the same answer: "Every-single-day." She sang and so did their father, says his sister.

We learn that Mama died shortly after Caleb was born and that Anna has had to take on the role of an adult in this household, caring for Caleb and doing household chores. Anna feels

guilty because the last words her mother spoke to her were "Isn't he beautiful?" Anna thought the new baby was anything but beautiful and never said goodnight to her mother that night. She says it took three whole days before she could love Caleb.

Caleb is now reaching out for his memory of his mother. He thinks that perhaps if Anna could remember the words of the songs she sang, he could remember the woman who sang them.

Papa may no longer sing, but his actions on his arrival in the house show his love for his children. He hugs them and jokes with them. When Caleb asks him why he doesn't sing, this is the opening Papa needs. He tells the children that he may sing again, that he's advertised for a wife. One of their neighbors had found a mail-order bride, and now, it turns out, Papa has got one too.

He reads her answer to his ad, and it is through this letter that the children are introduced to Sarah. From the few words in that letter we learn quite a bit about the woman who will become their stepmother. She's never been married, but her brother with whom she lived in Maine is about to marry. (The implication is that Sarah's role there has been usurped.) We learn that she loves the sea and hesitates to leave it behind. She describes herself as hardworking but states that she is not mild mannered. We also know that she has a cat. The children's reaction to the letter is prophetic. They smile, and Caleb says, "Ask her if she sings."

At the beginning of the next chapter we learn that the children and their father have all written to Sarah. We don't read their letters, but from Sarah's reply to each of them we can infer what each member of the family has written to her. Anna has wondered whether Sarah will miss the sea when she joins them on the plains. Caleb has wondered whether Sarah will be happy in their small house far from the nearest neighbors, whether she will be good at keeping a fire going and whether she will snore. Sarah reassures them. She encloses a book of sea birds for Anna, although Caleb is the one who reads it over and over.

Soon Papa announces that Sarah has agreed to come for a month's trial. This is pleasing news for them all and they smile as they go about their chores. She will come by train, wearing a yellow hat so that Papa will recognize her. She describes herself

as "plain and tall." The p.s. is what thrills Caleb: "Tell them that I sing."

Sarah arrives in the spring, a beautiful time on the prairie. Papa seems happy as he hitches up the horses before the long trip to the railroad station. He's kind to his horses. The children wait, conducting their chores in silence until Caleb becomes too nervous to stay quiet. He asks if he looks all right. He wonders if she'll be nice. Will she bring him some sea? Anna answers his questions reassuringly. One of his questions, maybe the most important one, whether Sarah will like the family, Caleb answers himself: "Of course she will like us." Then he adds, "We are nice."

Caleb is the first to spot Sarah's yellow bonnet as the wagon approaches. Papa's way with animals is apparent again on Sarah's arrival as, with one word, he silences the barking dogs. The family's first sight of Sarah affirms her description; she is plain and tall. Asked by Caleb if she has brought the sea, Sarah says she has brought things from the sea and herself and Seal, her cat. She gives Caleb a moon snail shell and Anna a sea stone. Caleb is delighted with the gift but worries that there is no sea here. Sarah compares the waving grass with the sea, but the children have seen a sad look on her face. They fear that she'll leave again in a month.

In chapter four we learn that Sarah and Seal are settling in. The dogs love Sarah and tolerate Seal. Sarah spreads her shell collection on her windowsill and tells the children about each one, but the children see her sadness.

Papa and Anna are shy with Sarah. Caleb is not. He chatters away and sticks right to her side. He's hungry for clues that she will stay. He apes her speech, teaches her the names of the wildflowers she picks. Sarah cooks the stew and Papa bakes the bread for their evening meal. After that meal, Sarah cuts Caleb's hair and scatters the cuttings for the birds to use.

Anna is warming up too. Sarah has fixed Anna's hair with a ribbon she brought from Maine, and as they face each other in the mirror, Anna thinks she might well be Sarah's daughter.

That evening the singing begins. Sarah sings a song in Old English with strange words that she teaches the others. She tells them more about life by the sea. Every time the children get hints that she may stay, they also hear hints that she misses the sea too much.

Sarah names the new lambs after her favorite aunts back in Maine. Finding a dead lamb in the grass, she stays with it to fight off the buzzards until night, when Papa buries it. Sarah makes sketches of her new home and the prairie to send back to Maine. At one point the family members sit together recalling their first words. Sarah says hers was "dune." When Caleb says they have no dunes here, Papa protests, "Yes we do," and heads off to the barn. He places a ladder beside the haymow and more or less dares Sarah to climb it. After Papa makes a bed of hay at the bottom, Sarah jumps into it. Soon they are all climbing and jumping.

The children talk to Sarah about winter on the prairie, and she takes them to the cow pond to teach them how to swim. Caleb wonders aloud if the pond is like the sea. Afterwards Anna falls asleep in the grass, dreaming that it has turned into the sea and that Sarah is happy.

When the neighbors arrive to help Papa plow a new field, they bring three banty chickens that Sarah loves. The women help hitch the plows and then turn to other tasks, such as food

preparation. As they work together Sarah talks to Maggie, the neighbor woman, about her loneliness, and Anna overhears their conversation. Maggie, too, misses her home in Tennessee, but she wisely observes that there are always things to miss, no matter where you are. Maggie has brought plants for Sarah, explaining that she must have a garden. Sarah had a garden in Maine but is more tentative about growing one here.

We learn that Sarah lacks an important skill for the prairie: driving a horse and wagon. Maggie assures her that she will learn. Hearing that Sarah wants to go to town by herself, the children worry that she plans to leave them.

When a fierce summer storm approaches, each family member rushes to do the necessary chores before it hits. After making sure all the animals are safe, the family waits in the barn for the storm to clear. Caleb is cheered when he sees Papa standing in the barn with his arm around Sarah. Sarah and Papa replow the field that has been damaged by hail.

As Papa teaches Sarah how to ride and drive the horses, the children go to the barn to cry unobserved. They fear they will lose her. As she drives off to town the next day, Anna recalls when the wagon took her own mother away. The children fret and worry while Sarah is gone.

Caleb projects his fear onto Seal, telling Sarah afterward that Seal was worried about her. It turns out that Sarah went to town to purchase gifts for her new family: colored pencils with the colors of the sea, seeds for her garden and a book of songs. We end with the knowledge that Sarah will stay.

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- In the book, the seasons of the year are described in terms of their effect on the prairie. Discuss how natural clues indicate the passing seasons in your area.
- What does Sarah do or say that shows that she is homesick? Let students talk about how it feels to be homesick.
- Ask students how they feel about each of the things Sarah loves.

- There are many hints that Papa does nice things for Sarah. Find and list them. Discuss with students which of those things would make them feel good.
- Identify the jobs or chores that each member of this household performs. Discuss whether Sarah does anything that is usually thought of as "men's work." How about Papa—does he do anything usually thought of as "women's work"? Have students look at their own households. Do they have chores for which they are responsible? What sort of chores do they do?
- Discuss whether there is compromise in this household. When?
- Try to imagine what Papa's ad said. Discuss why people might have advertised for wives. Does anyone still do that?
- Discuss aspects of life that must have been difficult for each character.
- Locate the places in the book that tell how each member of the household came to love Sarah and discuss how the author portrays that love. Find the places in the book where it shows that Anna has not forgotten her mother and discuss these passages.
- Ask students to write a paragraph describing each person in the story and place the paragraphs under pictures they have drawn. Make sure that their descriptions include aspects about the person that are not visible in their pictures.
- For a time, students might want to keep a list of all the chores done in their homes, how much time the chores require and who does them. Discuss whether they think the division of labor is fair.
- Draw prairie landscapes and seascapes such as Sarah might have made.
- Find and sing the song Sarah sang the first night.
- In this book, the family wants a new stepmother. In many of the books below, the stepparent is less welcome. You might want to read one or more of those books and compare the stepparent in other books with Sarah.

Thematically Related Books

Picture Books

Best, Cari. *Getting Used to Harry*. Orchard, 1995. ISBN 0 531 09494 4.

There's a light touch as well as a gentle lesson to this new stepfather story. We start with the wedding. The mother, Inky, marries Harry, the shoe store man, and everybody has a good time. Then Harry and Inky go off on their honeymoon, and Cynthia, staying with Grandma, says, "Love is the pits." When they come back, Harry is there all the time. Inky's affections are pulled in two directions, and Cynthia hates it. In the end, however, she realizes love is "the berries" and fully accepts Harry.

Kurtz, Jane. *Pulling the Lion's Tail*. Simon & Schuster, 1997. ISBN 0 689 80324 9.

This picture book is set in modern Ethiopia. It has elements of a folk tale, but the story also has realistic angles. Almaz, a young girl living with her father, tries to fulfill the role of the woman in the traditional household after her mother's death. When her father takes a new wife, Almaz's attempts at friendliness seem rebuffed. Her grandfather tells her to bring him the hairs from a lion's tail. To do this Almaz has to proceed slowly and with great patience to earn the lion's trust. Accomplishing the difficult task at last, her grandfather tells her to do the same with her new stepmother.

Novels

Avi. *Blue Heron*. Avon, 1992. ISBN 0 380 72043 4.

Maggie is a sensitive thirteen-year-old visiting her father, her young stepmother and baby half sister at a cabin on a lake near Fall River, Massachusetts. The father is difficult: He is moody and given to sudden rages. Her stepmother, Joanna, is sad and helpless. A great blue heron Maggie sees daily in the marsh becomes a symbol, perhaps, of Maggie's choice of life, of a kind of belief in magic. A withdrawn boy, living across the lake with his cold and distant parents, is trying to kill the

heron. At one point in the novel a parallel is made between him and the bird. Like many of Avi's novels, the book is deeper than it appears.

Bawden, Nina. *The Outside Child*. Puffin, 1989. ISBN 0 14 036858 2.

Because Jane's father is often away at sea, she lives with her two aunts and receives only sporadic visits from her father. When she finds out that her father has remarried and has another separate family, she determines to find and know her missing relatives, enlisting the aid of her friend Plato in finding them. When she does so, however, she finds that her strong father isn't really very strong, and that her stepmother is seriously disturbed.

Burch, Robert. *Ida Early Comes Over the Mountain*. Avon, 1990. ISBN 0 380 57091 2.

Ida is a free spirit who claims to have been everywhere, done everything and done it well. She turns up at the door of the Sutton family in rural Georgia during the Depression, looking for work, wearing a baggy brown sweater, overalls and clod-hoppers with a buckeye dangling from one of the laces. The motherless Sutton family needs her as much as she needs them, and Ida's presence is soon felt everywhere. When the other children at school make fun of Ida, hurting her feelings terribly, the Sutton children fail to stand up for their friend and lose her, almost forever.

Freeman, Suzanne. *The Cuckoo's Child*. Greenwillow, 1997. ISBN 0 688 14290 7.

Mia is confused and angry. Her parents, who had set out on a sailing cruise from Beirut where the family had been living for years, have failed to return. Their mother's sister, Kit, who lives in small-town Tennessee, has taken in Mia and her two half sisters. Convinced that she can somehow bring her parents back, Mia behaves in an increasingly erratic and bizarre manner. During their summer together, Mia breaks her aunt's arms by jumping on her from the water tower, destroys her aunt's relationship with one man and bites a new suitor's hand. At Bible School she betrays a friend in order to align herself with

a more glamorous clique, and she begins stealing from lunch bags. Ultimately, however, Mia allows others to help her heal her wounds and comes to understand how her mother, like the cuckoo who deposits her eggs in other birds' nests, has affected Kit's life.

Turner, Ann. *Grasshopper Summer.* Simon & Schuster, 1989. 0 02 789511 4.

This novel is not about stepparents, but it does take place on the prairie, where the mother has great difficulty adjusting. Sam White likes living with his grandmother and grandfather in their big house in Kentucky. He likes the rules there and adores his grandparents. So does his mother. The very things Sam loves frustrate his father and younger brother. Sam sees no reason for his father's decision to strike out on his own in Dakota Territory. The prairie both thrills and frightens Sam. When the sod house is ready, however, it quickly becomes home, and Sam replaces his fright and resentment with pride in his home and family.

Friendship

Charlotte's Web

by E. B. White

HarperCollins, 1952 ISBN 0 06 026385 7

Comments

Pronounced "just about perfect" by Eudora Welty, one of America's foremost writers, *Charlotte's Web* has been a shining star in the children's book world since its debut in 1952. It has sold over six million copies and earned its spot in a *Publishers Weekly* poll as the best children's book written between 1930 and 1960. It's been translated into eighteen languages. White is a superb writer, and in this book he walks a thin line between reality and fantasy. He makes wonderful lists within the story, including details that make the fantasy believable. He also has devised a clever way to introduce and define words that are usually thought of as beyond the knowledge and interest of young readers. It's very much a book about words.

For a time, the book was overused in the classrooms of America, reaching a point where some children read it each year of elementary school. This, coupled with the animated movie, gave the work an overfamiliarity. Fortunately, that overuse seems to have passed, and we can now look at the book with fresher perspectives.

Charlotte's Web deals with the gullibility of the populace and the manipulation of that populace through advertising. On a larger level, it deals with life and death itself. The book is a celebration of life and an acceptance of its end. The fact that in this volume we're going to stress the interpersonal relationships within the book must not be allowed to trivialize or negate those larger themes.

We are not distorting the book by focusing on the themes of friends and relations, however. Before beginning *Charlotte's Web*, E. B. White listed what was to be important in it: "the happiness of Charlotte and Wilbur when reunited, the gratitude of Wilbur, the depth of their friendship & what it means, the feeling of peace

& safety, knowing that Wilbur will not be killed, the Ferris wheel, 'There's nothing finer than to be high above the earth with the person you like best.'" At the end of *Charlotte's Web*, White makes one of the classic declarations of children's literature: "Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."

Detailed Summary

White starts the story with Fern's query to her mother, Mrs. Arable, "Where's Papa going with that ax?" This sets the stage for the first crisis of the book, as well as the first rescue of Wilbur, the pig. There's a humorous tone; White makes gentle fun of Fern's brother, Avery, being "heavily armed" as he approaches the breakfast table with air rifle and wooden dagger in hand, looking scornfully at Wilbur. Mr. Arable's remarks are sardonic. In response to Avery's request for a pig of his own, he replies that he only distributes pigs to early risers. He goes on to note that Fern was "up at daylight, trying to rid the world of injustice." Fern begins to nurture Wilbur, who takes to bottle feeding easily, and then Fern and her brother head off for school.

Do note the family's surname is Arable—an adjective meaning plowable or fertile soil. Fern's name, too, is worth noting, as a fern is one of the most pervasive and yet simple plants. Also notice that the family is eating bacon, another touch of irony. It is interesting that Avery is allowed to bring his popgun to school, something that would certainly not be condoned today but was less frowned upon in the 1950s.

So far, people have acted like humans and Wilbur has acted like a pig. The first bit of personification appears in the first paragraph of Chapter Two, in which Fern assiduously cares for Wilbur and Wilbur "was never happier than when Fern was warming up a bottle for him." Fern has been treating Wilbur as a child, and this is stated in the text when Fern watches Wilbur dig into the straw in the house her father made for him: "It relieved her mind to know that her baby would sleep covered up, and would stay warm."

The next threat to Wilbur's life comes in the second chapter, when Wilbur is five weeks old. At that point, Mr. Arable declares him big enough to sell. He overcomes Fern's pleas this time, declaring that he is no longer willing to bear the expense of feeding Wilbur. It's Mrs. Arable who suggests that they call the Zuckermans, Fern's uncle and aunt up the road, and Fern sells Wilbur to them for six dollars. Thus we get to the Zuckermans' barn, which will be the scene for much of the book.

There's a wonderful description of the smells and sights in a barn at the beginning of Chapter Three. We learn that Fern is a daily visitor there, taking up her position on an old milking stool in the sheepfold next to Wilbur's pigpen. There are rules, however; she cannot take Wilbur out of his pen or get in with him.

The personification of Wilbur and the other farm animals begins in earnest in this chapter. Wilbur is bored and lonely. As he puts it, "I'm less than two months old and I'm tired of living." Note that E. B. White has carefully rooted his fantasy in realism. Everything until Chapter Three is completely realistic and believable. Here the fantasy begins—the animals speak and care about each other in various degrees of concern and friendship. The goose, who repeats words, encourages Wilbur to escape through the loose board in the fence. Wilbur does so, and the goose asks, "How does it feel to be free?" Wilbur's answer is equivocal—he

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guesses he likes it. He begins tentatively to enjoy it when Mrs. Zuckerman raises the alarm that the pig is out. Pandemonium results. Humans—the Zuckermans and their hired man, Lurvy—approach, and the goose spreads the word amongst the animals. Wilbur regrets his freedom almost immediately: "If this is what it's like to be free, I believe I'd rather be penned up in my own yard." Freedom, he learns, implies responsibility. The goose directs the action, telling Wilbur where to run. The result is slapstick comedy—the first in the book. Mr. Zuckerman holds a pail of slops, and that's what saves the day. Wilbur ignores the goose's further directions and approaches the pail. Wilbur returns to the pigpen and is pleased to be home. Lurvy foreshadows much of the coming plot with his statement, "He's quite a pig."

Wilbur apparently likes schedules, but his plans for the next day are upset by the rain. He has made the acquaintance of Templeton, the rat, and one of his plans for that day had been a conversation with Templeton. Wilbur is lonely, and that loneliness sets the scene for the friendship that will occur. He tries to further his friendship with the goose and the lamb. The lamb says that pigs mean "less than nothing" to him. That remark causes Wilbur to engage in a very humorous philosophical argument about the possibility of something being "less than nothing," but the lamb is not interested. When Wilbur asks Templeton to play with him, Templeton replies that he doesn't understand the concept of play. Wilbur defines play as "to have fun, to frolic, to run and skip and make merry," but Templeton's total motivation is established as the search for food.

Charlotte, a spider living in the barn, offers friendship to Wilbur in her first words. She speaks out of the darkness, and her voice is "thin, but pleasant. 'Do you want a friend, Wilbur?' it said. 'I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you.'"

Wilbur's sleep is troubled that night. He waits for dawn, and when it comes, he rushes out to find his friend. Seeing no one, he pleads for the creature who offered friendship during the night to make himself or herself known. It is some time before the friend speaks again, and when she does so, it is with a very formal greeting: "Salutations." Wilbur sees Charlotte at last. She is described as grey and the size of a gumdrop. She introduces

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herself as "Charlotte A. Cavatica." The "A" stands for "Araneus." Immediately she attacks a fly, describing her actions as she does so. Wilbur is aghast. His new friend is a bloodthirsty creature. E. B. White has refused to give us a sentimental version of a friend. Charlotte is a spider, and she must live out a spider's life. We're given the facts of her existence immediately.

During barn conversation the goose notes Wilbur's innocence and his probable fate at Christmastime. Wilbur reflects on friendship as he settles back to sleep, "What a gamble friendship is!" He lists the things about Charlotte he doesn't like and then the things he does like. The chapter ends with more foreshadowing: "Underneath her rather bold and cruel exterior, she had a kind heart, and she was to prove loyal and true to the very end."

In Chapter Six, the goose eggs hatch, and Charlotte makes a formal speech congratulating the mother and father. The eighth egg is a dud, and the goose gives it to Templeton. We are told that Templeton has no scruples or any other redeeming qualities. The rest of the farm animals know and accept this about Templeton.

We start Chapter Seven with Wilbur's growing acceptance and admiration of Charlotte. Those cheerful thoughts come crashing down when the oldest sheep tells Wilbur he is being fattened up to be killed. This is the first indication that Fern understands what the animals are saying. She stiffens when she hears what the sheep says, although her stiffening may be a reaction to Wilbur's panicked scream. Charlotte calms him down with her promise, "You shall not die." Charlotte is in control from this moment on.

The scene switches to the Arable household in the next chapter. Fern tells her family the news of the barn. Mrs. Arable begins to worry about Fern's treatment of the animals as her equals and her interest in relating their conversations. We know now, for sure, that Fern understands what they say. After Fern has left the room, Mrs. Arable confides her fears to her husband. Mr. Arable, however, is not so sure that animals don't talk. He's not worried about Fern, but Mrs. Arable resolves to take her to see Dr. Dorian.

We learn more technical information about spiders in the next chapter, as Charlotte explains her anatomy to Wilbur within Fern's hearing. Wilbur boasts that he could spin a web if he wanted to, and Charlotte challenges him, even offering to coach him through the process. Another slapstick episode ensues. Wilbur fails, as we knew he would, but he accepts his failure easily. Charlotte gets in a joke about the Queensborough Bridge being a human attempt at spinning webs. Wilbur worries again about his fate, and Charlotte reassures him that she is working on a plan to save his life. Wilbur's job is to stay fit.

In Chapter Ten, Charlotte's plan is complete. She will fool people into saving Wilbur's life, because she knows people are very gullible. We get back to some human interplay as Avery and Fern interact over Avery's pet frog and then go to the Zuckerman's swing, which White describes as the "best swing in the county." Using the swing involves some daring, as one must straddle a knotted rope hung from a doorway beam. White uses second person as he describes the swinging techniques. Then Avery's clumsiness threatens Charlotte's life, but fate intervenes. Just as Avery is about to knock Charlotte into his candy box, he loses his balance and falls into the pig trough, smashing the rotten egg Templeton has stored beneath it. Everyone's relieved except Templeton, who mourns the loss of his egg. Wilbur saves Templeton some of his next slops to make up for it. Everyone settles down, and Charlotte begins to alter her web.

In the next chapter we discover what Charlotte has done. She has written "SOME PIG" in her web. Lurvy falls to his knees in prayer when he sees it. He then brings Mr. Zuckerman to see it. Trembling with awe, Mr. Zuckerman returns to the house and breaks the news to his wife in a way that sets the rest of the novel in motion. He attributes the miracle to the pig, not the spider, saying, "I think you had best be told that we have a very unusual pig." Mrs. Zuckerman gets the picture right away on being told what has happened and proclaims, "It seems to me we have no ordinary spider." Fred Zuckerman, however, is not to be persuaded. He declares that Charlotte is just a common grey spider but that the pig is something special. Fred Zuckerman puts on his best suit and goes to the minister to tell him of the

miraculous words in the web. The minister is sure he can find something to say about it in his sermon next Sunday, but the news is out long before Sunday.

People come from miles around to view the wondrous pig, which creates a traffic jam in the Zuckerman's driveway. Everyone's pleased except Fern. Although she is pleased that Charlotte's plan is apparently working, she liked the barn better without all those people around.

Charlotte calls a meeting of all the barn animals in Chapter Twelve, and all come except Templeton. Aware that fame is transient, Charlotte needs new words for the web. The goose offers "terrific" and that's an ideal choice, Charlotte says. Wilbur protests that he is not terrific, but Charlotte says that doesn't matter. Once people see it in print, they'll believe it—another jibe at the media. Charlotte, however, turns out to be a poor speller, as is everyone else in the barn. It's the oldest sheep who suggests that Templeton be dispatched to find appropriate words in ads found at the dump. The sheep offers to negotiate the deal. Knowing that Templeton will not do it just to save Wilbur's life, the sheep points out that Wilbur's leftovers are what keep the rat going in the winter. The deal is made. Wilbur protests again that he is not terrific, and Charlotte says that he is as far as she's concerned. She then adds, "You're my best friend, and I think you're sensational."

We are given a step-by-step description of the way Charlotte writes "terrific" in the web, as Charlotte talks to herself as she does it. Again Lurvy sees it first, and rapidly the news spreads. Zuckerman instructs Lurvy to use clean straw instead of manure for Wilbur's bed, a substance Wilbur finds scratchy and not as comfortable as the manure. Lurvy is also told to start construction of a crate with which to transport Wilbur to the County Fair. Meanwhile, Templeton goes to the Zuckermans' private dump in search of the appropriate advertising copy for Charlotte. He brings two discoveries back to Charlotte, only to find that "crunchy" and "pre-shrunk" will not do. His third try is successful, although Charlotte edits "with new radiant action" down to just "radiant."

We leave the barn for a bit and focus on Fern in Chapter Fourteen. Fern's conversation with her mother as they wash

dishes reawakens Mrs. Arable's concern about Fern's preoccupation with the barn animals and her conviction that the animals speak. Mrs. Arable expresses her concerns to Dr. Dorian. Dorian is a dispenser of wisdom in this book. He is perhaps the human equivalent to Charlotte in this regard. He envies Fern the time she spends in the barn. Mrs. Arable asks him if he understands the phenomenon of the words appearing in the web. He says he does not, but neither does he understand how a spider spins a normal web. He finds both occurrences miraculous. He assures Mrs. Arable that Fern will be fine and asks if there are any boys in her life. Mrs. Arable mentions Henry Fussy, and Dr. Dorian says that someday Henry will make some utterance that captures Fern's attention, another bit of foreshadowing.

The foreshadowing is continued at the beginning of the next chapter as the crickets foretell the coming of sadness and change, even on the perfect days of summer's end. Wilbur stands beneath the web and tries to fulfill its promise by looking radiant. The fame, we are told, does not alter Wilbur's sweet nature. He relishes his friendship with Charlotte, for "no pig ever had truer friends, and he realized that friendship is one of the most satisfying things in the world." When he learns that Charlotte may not be able to accompany him to the County Fair, he panics. She promises to come to the fair if it's at all possible, but first she must build an egg sac and lay eggs. Nature must take its course.

In the next chapter we get our first hint that Fern's focus is changing: She puts on her prettiest dress because she knows boys will be at the fair. Everybody is spruced up. Mrs. Zuckerman decides to give Wilbur a buttermilk bath, which Wilbur loves. Charlotte will go to the fair because Wilbur may need her. She also insists that Templeton join them, getting him to do so by telling him of the wonderful food to be found there. They hide from sight in Wilbur's crate. When the men are about to load Wilbur into the crate, however, Mr. Arable makes the unfortunate remark that Homer Zuckerman will get "some extra good ham and bacon" out of that pig. This starts another slapstick scene: Wilbur faints; Avery gets into the crate; the truck starts to roll away; Lurvy runs for water; Wilbur is revived and loaded into the crate and they're off to the County Fair.

The next chapter starts with the focus on Fern and Avery as they receive money and cautions from their parents and then head off to enjoy the fair. Mrs. Arable watches them go off on their own somewhat tearfully, for she sees it as the beginning of their independence. We soon switch back to Wilbur's world as the crowds begin to gather around him. Charlotte sees "Uncle," a much larger and more intimidating pig, in the next pen. She is not impressed, telling Wilbur that Uncle is "too familiar, too noisy, and he cracks weak jokes." He is, however, a threat because of his enormous size. Charlotte is "listless" and has less energy. She says that she feels "like the end of a long day." Wilbur is worried about her.

The next chapter brings an increasing sense of doom. Templeton heads off in search of food at the fair, and Charlotte, asking him to bring back a word, declares, "I shall be writing tonight for the last time."

We switch back to Fern. Henry Fussy, who was mentioned earlier, has invited her to ride with him on the Ferris wheel. Templeton returns to the pen with a word torn from a newspaper. The word is "humble," and Charlotte is satisfied with it. Templeton wishes her fond farewell and heads back to the food. The noise and excitement of the fair are in direct contrast to the quiet work of the spider as she spins her last web and writes her final word in it. The Arables return to the truck and head for home, where Fern declares that she has had the best time she has ever had. Mrs. Arable is pleased.

Wilbur awakes to see that Charlotte has made an egg sac containing more than five hundred eggs. She tells him that she will not live to see her children. Templeton returns from a night of gluttony with the news that Uncle is sporting a blue ribbon. The Zuckermans and Arables return and are upset to find that the other pig has won first prize. Fern wants to head to the midway, but her mother says she cannot. Mrs. Zuckerman cheers everybody up with another buttermilk bath for Wilbur. The loudspeaker summons Zuckerman and his famous pig to the judges' booth. They approach the grandstand with much fanfare. Fern races off to the Ferris wheel.

The voice on the loudspeaker repeats Charlotte's web words as Wilbur is brought into the center. He wins a special prize, but he faints with excitement. Templeton wakes him up with a bite to his tail. Lurvy rushes back with a pail of water, which he throws at Mr. Zuckerman.

The next chapter's title increases our sense of foreboding: "Last Day." Charlotte is at peace and tells Wilbur so. She declares that nothing can harm him now that he has won his prize and the world is his to enjoy. He asks why Charlotte has done all this for him, and she replies, "You have been my friend." She also says that by helping him, "perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle." Wilbur declares that he would give his life for Charlotte. That's when Charlotte tells Wilbur that she is dying. Wilbur is disconsolate. Wilbur enlists Templeton's aid in saving Charlotte's egg sac, bribing him by giving him first chance at all future slops. The last words of this chapter describing Charlotte's death are perhaps the saddest in the book: "No one was with her when she died."

In the final chapter we learn that Wilbur has guarded the egg sac as though guarding his own children, and one sunny spring morning the baby spiders hatch. Wilbur tells them of his friendship with their mother and then watches forlornly as most are borne off by the spring winds to start their lives elsewhere. Three remain, however, and greet Wilbur as their mother did: "Salutations." Years pass, and Wilbur befriends Charlotte's grandchildren and great-grandchildren, but he never forgets Charlotte. "She was in a class by herself."

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- Find the statements about friendship in *Charlotte's Web* and discuss with students whether or not they have meaning for them.
- Before Wilbur meets Charlotte, he is both bored and lonely. Talk about whether those feelings are prerequisites for starting friendships.
- Charlotte offers friendship to Wilbur with the words, "Do you want a friend, Wilbur? I'll be a friend to you. I've watched you all day and I like you." Ask students what would happen if

they said those words to a person whom they wanted to be their friend. What would they be more apt to say? How do they know when someone wants to be their friend?

- Although the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur is the strongest one in the book, there are others. List all the acts of friendship in the book that students can find. Discuss whether Templeton ever does anything except out of greed.
- Charlotte writes words in her web about Wilbur, and Wilbur tries to live up to them. Discuss with students how they think they react to praise. Does it matter who praises them? Do they believe them? How do students react to words of criticism? Have students try praising someone tomorrow in a believable way. Discuss the results.
- Ask children what words they would write in the web to describe another character in the book.
- Look at the way that the animals speak to Templeton and treat him. Discuss whether he might have felt differently if they had treated him differently.
- At the end of Chapter Five, Wilbur talks about "the doubts and fears that often go with finding a new friend." Ask students whether his thoughts in any way resemble their own.
- Many sections of the book offer descriptive passages in praise of nature. Find and read aloud one you particularly like, and discuss with the class what you like about it.
- Look at the ways in which Charlotte acts like a mother to Wilbur—protecting and reassuring him and telling him a story or singing him a song when he demands one, even though she's very tired and has a lot on her mind.
- Read the first paragraph of Chapter Three, in which the smells of a barn are delineated, and compare it with the prologue to Gary Paulsen's *The Winter Room*.
- Wilbur defines play as "to have fun, to frolic, to run and skip and make merry." Have the class define play. Discuss whether their definition has changed over time. What do they think their parents' definitions might be? Is play synonymous

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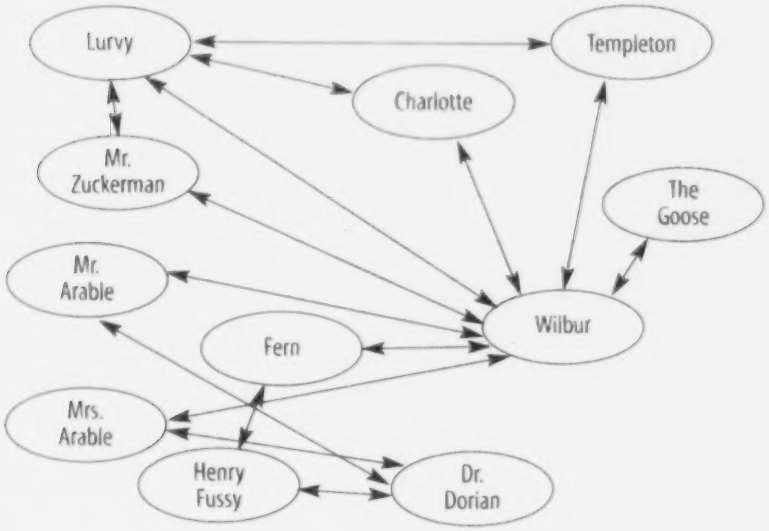
with having fun? Have them survey students in grades above and below theirs to learn their definitions of fun. Have them make a graph showing the results of their survey and draw conclusions from their graph.

- Have students work in small groups to make a sociogram of the characters in Charlotte's Web by placing each character's name in a circle on a piece of paper or bulletin board and drawing arrows between the characters to show their connections in the story. It might look something like this:



Thematically Related Books

Picture Books

Edwards, Michelle. *Chicken Man*. Lothrop, 1991. ISBN 0 688 09708 1.

This is the story of a simple man who enjoys life no matter what the task is. His reaction to his first job, caring for the chickens on the kibbutz, is so joyful that others become envious.

Joyce, William. *Bently & Egg*. HarperCollins, 1992. ISBN 0 694 01211 4.

Bently is an artistic and sensitive frog. When his best friend, Kack Kack the duck, asks him to watch over her egg, he does so. He decorates the egg, which is then taken by a passing boy. Bently sets off in pursuit.

Novels

King-Smith, Dick. *Babe—The Gallant Pig*. Knopf, 1997. ISBN 0 679 87393 7.

Babe bears some similarity to Wilbur, and the friendship between Babe and the taciturn farmer is worth exploring.

Paulsen, Gary. *Harris and Me*. Bantam, 1993. ISBN 0 440 40994 2.

This book relates a hilarious series of episodes on a farm, with havoc reigning thanks to the actions and reactions of the narrator and his cousin Harris.

Paulsen, Gary. *The Winter Room*. Orchard, 1989. ISBN 0 531 08439 6.

In this story two young boys grow up on a farm in northern Minnesota, listening to their uncle's stories of an almost mythological logging past.

Peck, Robert Newton. *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. Random House, 1994. ISBN 0 679 85306 5.

A farm boy delights in the pig that has become his pet. His relationship with his father is difficult, made more so when his father declares that the pig must be killed.

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Bad Girls

by Cynthia Voigt

Scholastic, 1996 ISBN 0 590 60134 2

Comments

Bad Girls is about friendship, leadership, bullying, peacemaking, fairness, justice, and taking responsibility for one's actions. Although many stories have been written about school, this one digs deeper than most into the characters in the story. The story follows two fifth grade girls from their first day in a new school as they negotiate their place within the class, find friends, make a great deal of trouble and ultimately learn something about themselves.

Some boys may be reluctant to read this book because of the title. Don't let the title of this book fool them or you. This book is about the dynamics of a fifth grade class, and it concerns the boys in that classroom as much as it does the girls.

Detailed Summary

Margalo and Mikey meet on the first day of fifth grade in Mrs. Chemsky's class. Since the strict Mrs. Chemsky seats her students in alphabetical order, Margalo Epps and Mikey Elsinger sit together. Both girls make much of the fact that their initials both spell ME. The use of the initials throughout the story takes on various meanings and importance.

Margalo is quick to point to this as well as other similarities between them. There are dissimilarities as well. Margalo has six siblings, though many are step or half siblings. Mikey is an only child. Both are newcomers and friendless in this school. Mikey is not as advanced academically as Margalo. Her poor spelling often makes her writing indecipherable. However, the girls are soulmates, and they quickly confirm the fact that they are trouble.

Called upon to tell the class something about herself, Mikey immediately establishes her prickly, defiant personality even

under the glare of Mrs. Chemsky. Since Mrs. Chemsky will not allow the use of nicknames in the classroom, Mikey asks that she be called "Miss Elsinger." Mikey also demonstrates her athleticism at the first recess when she joins the boys' soccer game, confronting their leader, Louis Caselli, as she does. Soon the confrontation between Mikey and Louis goes beyond words, as she punches him and he yanks her braid. When another Caselli gets into the fight, Margalo enters to help defend Mikey. Soon eleven members of the class, as well as some members of other classes, are involved.

At the beginning of the second week of school, Mrs. Chemsky announces Pet Day as an upcoming event, and some students remember a previous Pet Day when the dogs got loose and began to fight. It was Mrs. Chemsky who took charge then, sending the children to safety and breaking up the fighting dogs with pails of water.

As they anticipate Pet Day, Louis dares Mikey to eat a dog biscuit, and much to his chagrin and loss of face, she does so. Then, at Mikey's moment of glory, she offers to share a bite of the biscuit with Margalo, but Margalo refuses, calling it stupid. This results in a loss of face for Mikey. An altercation with Louis follows, and Mrs. Chemsky enters just in time to see Mikey punch him in the nose.

In time Mikey succeeds in breaking the gender barrier of the daily soccer game, and two other girls join the team with her, although Margalo still refuses to play. The team that includes girls beats Louis's team. As Margalo watches Mikey play, she listens to other girls criticizing Mikey. Alarmed by their criticisms of Mikey and unable to defend her, Margalo changes the subject by starting the rumor that Mrs. Chemsky is a witch. This results in the class's careful watching of Mrs. Chemsky's every move and mood.

On Pet Day Margalo brings a rat to school. Other children react with either revulsion or admiration. Denise asks Mrs. Chemsky to "make it die." Mikey comes in with a mystery shoe box and places it on her desk, warning others not to touch it after spreading the rumor that it contains something dangerous. Louis knocks the box to the floor just as Mrs. Chemsky is moving

Margalo's rat to the windowsill. The rat cage opens and the rat escapes. Bedlam results. Thus ends Pet Day in Mrs. Chemsky's room.

Margalo and Mikey watch Louis bullying a second-grader, and Mikey declares that she hates Louis. She'd like Mrs. Chemsky to perform some spell on him. Margalo tells her that she made up the rumor about Mrs. Chemsky being a witch.

As the story continues, Margalo and Mikey plot to get more information about Louis so that they can humiliate him. A classmate has told Margalo that Louis has a crush on Lynnie. Meanwhile, Margalo has been reaching out to the girls in the class, and they have more or less accepted her. Mikey still has only Margalo for a friend. As Margalo's plotting continues, she resolves that now that girls are playing on the recess soccer team, those girls should also be allowed to play on the team that represents the school in interschool soccer matches.

While all this is happening, Mrs. Chemsky confronts the witch rumor, first by denouncing it as untrue and then teasing, "Besides, if I was a witch, a real witch, don't you think a lot of you would be toads, or broomsticks?" Mikey tells Margalo admiringly, "You're really bad."

When the female soccer players attempt to try out for the team, Louis becomes so infuriated by their presence that the coach scolds him for his behavior and sends him home early. Louis reacts by acting out at school the next day. Mrs. Chemsky takes him into the hall, talks to him and then leaves him there for a time-out. Louis blames Mikey for everything.

After girls become members of the school soccer team, Margalo tries to exert her new power further by telling Mikey that she and the other girls must now leave the soccer team in order to form an all-girls team. They then could beat the boys' team and become the team that plays other schools. This would, of course, infuriate Louis. Mikey admires Margalo's deviousness, noting that her own actions were more about anger than mischief.

Lynnie now confronts Louis in front of his friends. She dumps notes that Louis has written to her all over the classroom floor. Embarrassed and angry, Louis almost punches Mrs. Chemsky as

she tries to intervene. When she takes him into the hall this time, Mrs. Chemsky leaves the door open, and the class hears her scolding Louis.

Again Louis blames Mikey for his troubles, and a fistfight ensues. When the girls threaten to leave the soccer team, the boys make it clear to Louis that they'd choose Mikey as a teammate over him. Defeated, Louis stalks off in anger and humiliation. Then, in a moment of real pique, Louis cuts off Mikey's long braid. He is suspended for four days and placed in another classroom when he returns.

What follows is a battle for leadership, as Mikey, Margalo and another classmate, Rhonda, each attempt to be the person responsible for getting Louis readmitted to the classroom. Mrs. Chemsky finally presents the dilemma to the class, which votes strongly in favor of Louis's readmission. Mrs. Chemsky extracts a promise from Mikey that she won't hit him again. The next day Louis returns to the classroom and apologizes to Mikey for cutting off her hair.

When it comes time for the members of the class to choose an extension activity, both Margalo and Mikey choose "Making Models," not because they particularly want to make models, but

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rather because that's what Louis has chosen to do. Louis is furious at their intrusion into his activity. In a rare moment of generosity in this book, Ira sees that the girls do not have a model to build and offers to share his extra model with them.

Power struggles erupt again when class elections are called. As the girls evaluate themselves as candidates for president, we learn a bit about Margalo's home life. Comparing their households leads first to distrust and then a quarrel between Mikey and Margalo. Both girls would like to be class president. The quarrel becomes a shoving match and then a fistfight. Each hopes the other will apologize and back down. After hearing the other girls say they wouldn't vote for Mikey, Margalo reacts by changing her stance and telling Mikey to run.

Margalo makes a nominating speech for Mikey, and then Rhonda embarrasses everyone by making inappropriate comments about Mikey. Mikey peeks during the election and sees that even Margalo didn't vote for her. After Ira wins, Mikey attacks Margalo for not voting for her, and Margalo stands up to Mikey, defending her right to vote for Ira.

In the midst of all the power struggles, Rhonda has made many cruel remarks about Mikey. Annoyed, Margalo begins to replace Rhonda's lunch bag with bags filled with dead and decaying items. When she is sent to the office, Mikey insists on going with her, taking partial responsibility for Margalo's actions even though she did not know for sure that the perpetrator was Margalo. This reaffirms their friendship and they exchange confidences. For the first time they also exchange phone numbers and decide to sleep over at each other's houses. Faced with the disapproval of the class, Margalo and Mikey now begin to reassess their behavior and, as the book ends, to approach each other with greater honesty.

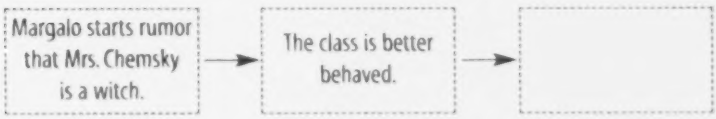
Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- Reread the part where Louis and Mikey have their first confrontation. At which points could it have been stopped or deflected in some way? List the physical fights in this book. At which point could the fights have been stopped before they

had become physical? Discuss what students could have done or said to the fighters to stop them.

- What does the class know, after reading this book, about Mrs. Chemsky? Would they like her for a teacher? Would she like them?
- Find the places in the book where characters show their vulnerability. What do they need? What do they get?
- Mikey thinks Margalo is very brave and a good liar. What evidence does she have?
- In many places in the book, Louis acts in a bullying manner. What behaviors make him a bully? How do the other characters react to him? Whom does Louis pick on? Make a list of reasons why one might be called a bully. When does teasing or kidding become bullying?
- When Mikey is expressing her anger at Louis, she says that she would like to shoot him. Does she mean it? She's angry and uses words and deeds to express that anger. Brainstorm a class list of constructive ways to deal with anger.
- When Margalo calls Louis a leader, Mikey says he's not a leader but a bully. What's the difference?
- What does Mrs. Chemsky do with her anger? What does the class do with theirs?
- Mikey differentiates between acting out in anger and acting out in mischief. Discuss acting out. Ask students to figure out what caused their own latest acting out and decide whether it was anger or mischief.
- At various points in the book, Mrs. Chemsky exerts control. Why and when does she do this?
- Make a list of all the characters in the book. Under each character's name, ask students to write what they know about the character from reading the story. What is each character's view of himself or herself? How does that match up with the way others think of him or her? Using this list, decide what each character wants in this book and whether he or she succeeds in getting it.

- Have students make a picture of themselves on a paper bag. On the outside of the bag, they can write words to describe how others view them. Inside the bag, they can place words that describe how they think about themselves.
- Each action in the book causes a further action. For instance, Margalo's creation of the witch rumor causes changes in class behavior. What changes after that rumor? Make a flow chart showing this, such as:



- Some people in the class call Mikey "Porker." What do nicknames do to people? Take a poll of the class to see how many like their nicknames and what nicknames they would prefer to have.
- Make a list of the encounters Mikey has with Louis. How does each person react to each encounter? You might be able to show this in a chart such as:

OCCASION	ACTION	REACTION
First day of school	Mikey crashes the boys' soccer game	Louis is furious. Mikey is victorious.

- Make a chart showing the difference in attitudes in the class before and after the girls join the school soccer team. Would the class say that the effect was good, bad or indifferent?
- There's a battle for leadership in this fifth grade classroom. Who wins it? Find some graphic way of showing the battle.

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Thematically Related Books

Novels

Fenner, Carol. *Randall's Wall*. Bantam, 1991. ISBN 0 553 48021 9.

Randall is a frightened and neglected child, scorned by his classmates. Then one of them, Jean, takes notice of Randall and reaches out to him.

Konigsburg, E. L. *The View from Saturday*. Aladdin, 1999. ISBN 0 689 829647.

Mrs. Olinski, a paraplegic teacher at Epiphany Junior High School, makes a surprising choice for her team to compete in an Academic Bowl. Scorning the usual academic stars and overachievers, she chooses Noah, Nadia, Ethan and Julian, and it is some time before the reader and the students figure out why they were selected.

Paterson, Katherine. *Flip-Flop Girl*. Penguin, 1994. ISBN 0 14 037679 8.

This novel revolves around a friendship between two girls—one Caucasian and the other Latino. A very understanding teacher alleviates the conflicts that each girl faces at home and at school.

Lily's Crossing

by Patricia Reilly Giff

Delacorte, 1997 ISBN 0 385 32142 2

Comments

This book could have been placed in either the "Friendship" section or the one on "Families," as it deals extensively with both. The story, set in 1944 in Rockaway, New Jersey, charts Lily's progress from being almost totally self-centered to reaching out and understanding others. Although the book alludes to World War II, the story focuses on family and friends and truth and guilt, rather than war. Children may need a little background about World War II in order to understand some of the references in the book, however.

Detailed Summary

Lily's mother died when Lily was a baby. For Lily, the stars pasted on her bedroom ceiling by her mother have come to represent a gift from her to Lily. Lily is a poor student and is anxious for the summer to begin. She and her grandmother (Gram) spend summers at Rockaway Beach. Lily's father (Poppy) joins them on weekends. Rockaway represents freedom to Lily—freedom from school and piano lessons, and freedom to write what she wants to write and to go to movies with her best friend, Margaret. Almost immediately, Lily's plans for a perfect summer are destroyed. Poppy has arranged for a truck to bring them to Rockaway this year, and on the truck will be the dreaded piano. This is a minor change compared with the others that are coming.

During Lily's first conversation with Margaret at Rockaway, we learn that Lily has told Margaret that her aunt is a spy in Germany, when, in reality, she doesn't know where her aunt is. The girls eat some candy that is meant to go to Margaret's brother in the army. As they eat the candy they wonder about Margaret's brother's role in the war. Was he at D-day? But the big news is that Margaret is moving to the Detroit area the next day.

Lily is devastated. Margaret's house will be boarded up for the duration of the summer, and she gives Lily a key to it so that Lily can use the house for her own hideaway.

At the beach house Lily sleeps on the front porch, which sticks out over the canal. With that easy access, Lily often prowls around at night keeping tabs on the neighborhood from a rowboat. This night she's spying on the Orban family. They are talking with someone named Albert and recommending that he make friends with Lily. In a heavy accent, Albert replies that he must find Ruth.

Lily forgets about Albert the next day when Poppy arrives to tell them that he, too, will be going off to war. When she learns that he has already told Gram the news, Lily reacts with fury, running away early the next morning to Margaret's empty house. Suddenly she realizes that her father is leaving and runs out across a field to wave good-bye at the departing train. This failure to say good-bye haunts Lily for the rest of the story.

Gram, who has been angry with Lily for not saying good-bye to her father, makes peace with Lily, comforting her when she sees how distressed Lily is over her father's departure. Gram announces that they are having dinner at the Orban's house that night. Although Lily dreads having to meet Albert, she knows she will have to go to dinner.

Albert, it turns out, has emigrated from Hungary via Canada to escape the fighting. He is Mr. Orban's nephew and has a sister, Ruth, who has been delayed in France because of illness. The adults hope that Albert and Lily will become friends and enjoy the summer together. We learn that Albert cannot swim, but that Lily is a proficient swimmer. This information will prove vital later in the story.

Lily tells lies frequently as she goes around the town. Her lying is facile and sometimes without apparent reason. She's anxious for a letter from her father but gets one from Margaret instead. Before she has time to read the letter, however, she sees Albert running toward her. Alerted by Albert that a kitten is drowning, Lily dives into the water and saves it. They name it "Paprika" and take the rescued animal to Margaret's empty

house. The kitten, too young to be taken from its mother, needs milk. Lily, however, lost her purse containing all her savings when she dove in the water. Albert says he will find milk for the kitten. Lily is disappointed when Albert offers to take sole responsibility for caring for the kitten, since this seems to preclude the possibility of friendship.

The next day she sees Albert trying to teach himself how to swim. As a big wave approaches Albert, Lily attempts to save him but ends up tossed by the water onto the beach. Albert rescues himself. Embarrassed and needing to get the upper hand, Lily boasts that she will row out to the convoy offshore, swim the last distance and board her father's ship. Albert asks to be taken along, and Lily agrees.

Unable to commandeer a rowboat that night, Lily suggests that they sneak into a movie instead. This involves climbing a rickety fire escape, a very difficult thing for Albert to do. He does it, responding to a dare from Lily. The movie is a war story involving sinking ships. This upsets both Lily and Albert, Lily because of her father and Albert because he'd been on such a ship. Their friendship grows stronger.

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Lily confides in Albert that she brings a paper star with her each summer to remember her mother. Albert tells Lily that the Nazis killed his mother and father because they published an antigovernment newspaper, and that he is angry with his parents for risking their lives. He also tells Lily about his escape from Hungary and his concern for his sister, Ruth, still in France, which is now occupied by the Nazis. He had not been allowed to say good-bye to either his parents or Ruth.

Albert, Lily and the cat take a late-night row out to see the convoy. Albert fully intends to learn to swim well enough to swim to the boats, cross the Atlantic to Europe and find his sister. Nervously, Lily tries to point out the reality of such an endeavor.

Lily gets an affectionate letter from her father telling her that he is shipping out, which ends with the words "Hug Gram too. She loves you, Lily, more than you know." He doesn't mention her failure to say good-bye to him, but he reminds her to finish three books, *Madeline*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Three Musketeers*, advice that puzzles Lily.

A letter from Margaret tells Lily that Margaret's brother, Eddie, is missing in action. Margaret asks that Lily send her Eddie's picture from Margaret's living room. This poses a dilemma for Lily. She needs money to send the picture, but if she asks Gram for it, Gram will know that she has been using Margaret's house.

While they are pondering how to get the money, Albert tells Lily that his grandmother had sewn money into the collar of his coat. He retrieves the coat, and Lily cuts the money out but then realizes she cannot spend his money, seeing the connection between the paper stars she treasures and the money Albert's grandmother gave him. His grandmother also put a photograph of Albert, Ruth and herself into the seam. Albert tells Lily he had a violin that he loved to play, and that he wishes he hadn't had to leave it behind in Hungary.

Albert is most anxious to learn to swim so that he can get to Europe, and Lily tries hard to teach him how, but not very successfully. Albert still believes Lily's early boast that it would be possible to row first and then swim to the military ships and then hitch a ride to Europe to rescue his sister.

Lily and Gram talk honestly together about missing Lily's father and the other changes the war has made in their lives. Soon afterward Lily tells Albert that she has lied about being able to swim to the boat. She confesses that she often lies. Albert confesses that he, too, lies and that, just as Lily refused to say goodbye to her father, he had acted cowardly when officials came to get Ruth. Lily makes a pact with Albert that they will never lie to each other again.

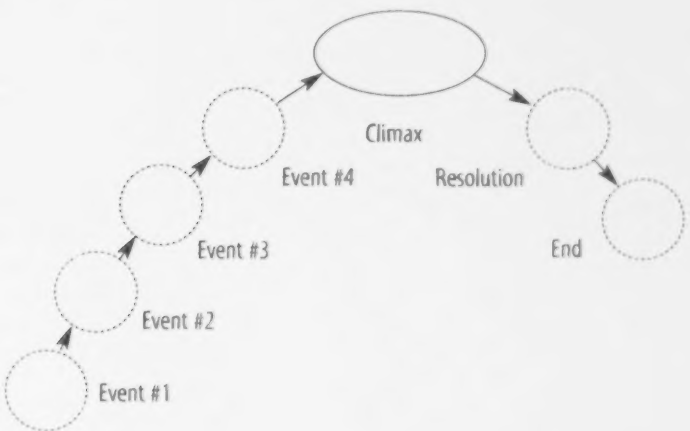
Letters from Lily's father continue to urge her to read specific books. In the latest letter he tells her that *The Promise* is the key to it all. Lily fails to find *The Promise* at the library, though she does find some of his other suggestions. On the way home a summer storm arrives, and Lily sees Albert heading out to sea in a rowboat. Lily and the cat, which was hiding in Lily's boat, set out after Albert in the storm. Albert nearly drowns before she can rescue him.

As they recuperate in Lily's kitchen, Gram points out the sacrifices both families have made to make the world better for their children. She then gives Albert a violin. Suddenly Lily remembers her library book, which she had left in the rowboat. When they retrieve it, Albert says it is a book about the French Revolution. Realizing that her father has been trying to tell her, through book titles, that he is in France, Lily and Albert write to him, giving him Ruth's address in the hope that he can find her.

Before the summer ends, the Allies free Paris. Albert and Lily begin to feel more hopeful about their families as they watch the liberation in a newsreel at the movies, paying their way this time at Albert's insistence. In a sort of epilogue to the book, we witness Lily's father's safe arrival at their home in St. Albans. He has been able to locate Ruth, who is fine and anxious to come to Canada to be with Albert there. Lily's father says that everything is the same, but Lily and her grandmother know that's not true. To Lily's great surprise and delight, Albert returns with the Orbans the following summer to Rockaway, together with his sister, Ruth.

Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- There are several conflicts between the characters in this book. Find those conflicts and discuss ways in which they could have been resolved.
- Miscommunication plays a big role in this book. Find the places where this occurs and make a series of if/then statements, such as "If Lily had told Gram about Margaret's house, then _____." "If Lily had told Albert that she wanted to share caring for the kitten, then _____." Discuss which of these misunderstandings proved to be most crucial.
- Where do students think the climax of the story comes? Make a flow chart, such as the one below, with each shape containing one event:



- Lily and Albert are very different from each other in many ways. How were they able to become friends in spite of these differences? Do any of those differences strengthen their friendship? They also have several things in common. List those things. Would students want to be a friend of either Lily or Albert? Why?
- The stars on Lily's ceiling have great importance for her. They also are a kind of symbol. Talk about the significance and meaning of the stars.

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- Lily hates the piano. Why, then, do her father and grandmother make her practice? Is there a compromise? Are there possible compromises in other such family conflicts in real life? Is compromise always desirable?
- Near the end of the book, Gram talks about the sacrifices that Lily's and Albert's families have made for them. What sacrifices do students think their families or friends have made for them?
- Find Rockaway on a map. How far is it from New York City? Use one of the map sites on the Internet to route Lily's journey.
- Make a chart or illustration showing each character in the story. Around each character have students write words that describe the character's appearance and personality.
- Look at the times in the story when Lily lies. Sometimes the lies get her out of trouble, and other times they get her into trouble. Can you figure out why she tells each one and what the result is? Make a chart such as the one below:

Lie	Person Lied to	Reason for Lie	Results of Lie

- Make a list of the major events in this book. Think about the state of the friendship between Lily and Albert at each of those points in the story. Show these using a line graph such as the one on the following page.

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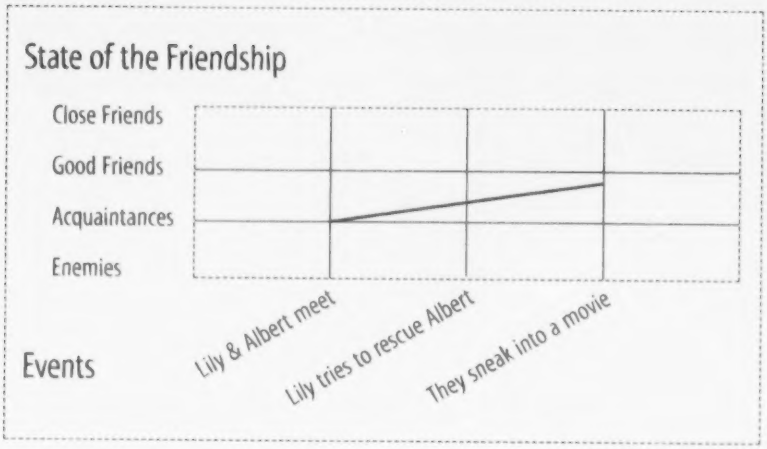


- Find a way to show graphically how and when Lily's feelings about Gram change in the course of the story.

Thematically Related Books

Picture Books

Bateman, Teresa. *The Ring of Truth*. Holiday, 1997. ISBN 0 8234 1255 5.

Patrick calls it blarney; others call it lies. The king of the leprechauns has a solution for it, though.

Novels

DeClements, Barthe. *Liar, Liar*. Cavendish, 1998. ISBN 0 7614 5021 1.

This novel, too, deals with the role of lies within friendship. Marybelle tells the lies in order to gain the respect of the class. It is Gretchen who is most injured by Marybelle's lies.

Henkes, Kevin. *Words of Stone*. Greenwillow, 1992. ISBN 0 688 11356 7.

The communication between this boy and girl revolves around words and symbols literally made with stones. The friendship goes well until Blaze catches Joelle lying.

Lowry, Lois. *Autumn Street.* Dell, 1980. ISBN 0 440-40344 8.

In this book set in the same time period as *Lily's Crossing,* we watch a friendship develop over a wide gulf. Not only are the friends of different races, but one is the pampered daughter of a wealthy family and the other is the child of a servant.

Wringer

by Jerry Spinelli

HarperCollins, 1997 ISBN 0 06 024914-5

Comments

This Newbery Award-winning novel is an intricate and wonderful book. Jerry Spinelli knows and understands small town life, having grown up in Norristown, Pennsylvania, among kids very much like the characters in this story. Spinelli's memoir, *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*, describes his own childhood. Reading some or all of that autobiography to your class may help them see the man behind the name and the kid behind the man.

In this book a town releases caged pigeons to be shot down in massive numbers as an annual town fund-raiser, a form of adult-condoned violence. Pigeons that do not die immediately are dispatched by ten-year-old boys, called "wringers." Although this ritual and one boy's fear of becoming a wringer dominate the book, *Wringer* is a book about friendship, bullies and courage. Through the actions of Palmer, the protagonist, we see his character grow over a period of a little over one year from that of a fearful loner dreading the future to a boy taking charge of his own life and understanding true friendship.

In addition to Palmer, the more peripheral characters are also well developed and interesting. Palmer's father, an award-winning sharpshooter at previous pigeon shoots, supports his son and learns from him. The passive resistance to intense bullying that Palmer's friend, Dorothy, practices would warm the heart of Gandhi.

The fact that this small town celebrates killing pigeons may seem bizarre until one realizes that, not so long ago, turkey shoots involved real turkeys. And then, of course, there are all those safaris.

Detailed Summary

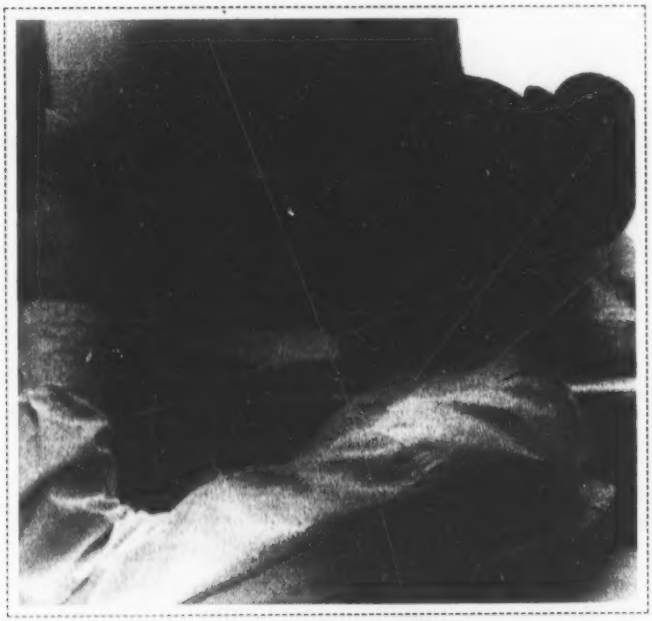
The book begins with a reproduction of an article from a newspaper announcing the sixty-third annual pigeon shoot, which is about to occur in the town of Waymer. The column explains that people who have paid a fee will have a chance to shoot at 5,000 pigeons as they are released from cages. "Wringers," ten-year-old boys, will dispatch any birds that fall injured to the ground. Proceeds from the event will support the community park.

Armed with this disturbing information, we turn the page to begin the story. The first simple declarative sentence gets right to the crux of the matter. "He did not want to be a wringer." Palmer has known this for a long time, and for years he has dreaded the day when he would be expected to become a wringer. It haunts his dreams and his waking life.

Palmer's ninth birthday comes, and his three friends, Beans, Mutto and Henry, arrive to celebrate it with him. Palmer had feared that they would not come, and their arrival signals their acceptance of Palmer. He hopes they'll even give him a nickname. These boys are undesirable friends as far as Palmer's mother is concerned. She objects to their lack of manners and their rude behavior. She particularly dislikes Beans. Beans, however, is the leader and is much respected by kids under ten. The gifts they have brought are meant to be funny, and the boys are much amused. Palmer's mother gives him real gifts.

When the boys sing a raucous "Happy Birthday," Palmer learns that they have given him a nickname: Snots. He also learns that these boys dub Dorothy Gruzik, Palmer's friend who lives across the street, "Fish Face." They harass her whenever they get a chance. Palmer cringes as they do so, but he enjoys feeling part of the gang at last.

After his party they all move on to the park, although Palmer, dreading the pigeon shoot that will soon occur there, hates the very thought of the park—especially the soccer field. Once there, Palmer does not participate as the boys play with his new soccer ball, but he enjoys being a part of it all. Then the play changes and the boys begin acting out the pigeon shoot. As their



play continues, Palmer begins to sense that Henry is less a part of the group and more of a group victim.

They move on to the playground, going down the slide head-first in a stack. In spite of his misgivings, Palmer joins them and ends up on the bottom of the stack. Then Farquar, a legendary wringer, appears at the side of the playground. He is there to administer The Treatment, an initiation for those newly arrived at the signal age of nine and repeated each year thereafter. In an effort to elude this initiation, some boys have denied their ninth birthdays, refusing to allow any celebration no matter how small. It is, however, an honor to be given The Treatment by Farquar. The initiation consists of being hit very hard nine times in the upper arm, once for each year. Farquar puts every bit of strength he can into it. As Palmer steels himself to get his, he notices that only Henry is showing alarm instead of glee. Palmer takes the hits with a silent scream.

When Palmer's father sees his arm, he knows what has happened and treats it with some respect. He tells Palmer's mother that the custom has been around for many years. Palmer's father

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gives him his own lead toy soldiers as a birthday and coming-of-age gift. These soldiers have been handed down in Palmer's family for four generations. Palmer has thoroughly enjoyed his birthday, painful arm and all, until he confronts himself in the mirror and bursts into tears as he realizes that he is nearing the age to become a wringer.

In school, Palmer has become a hero because of his "Treatment" arm. Kids who ignored him before cluster round to inspect the wound. Dorothy Gruzik, however, is not among the admiring crowd, and her lack of interest in his arm bothers Palmer. Eventually he can stand it no longer and approaches Dorothy with his shirtsleeve rolled up to reveal the bruise. Dorothy is playing hopscotch. She ignores her former friend completely, and Palmer runs off to his new friends. When they return to taunt Dorothy, he does not feel as bad about it as he usually does, although he does not participate. Dorothy handles the abuse by completely ignoring it, an ability that Palmer somehow envies.

The time has come for Family Fest, a weeklong event filled with fun that culminates in the pigeon shoot. Palmer's anguish over the pigeon shoot is now explained through a series of flashbacks, in which he recalls several pivotal events that changed his feelings about pigeons. He remembers witnessing his first pigeon shoot when he was four, and the horror it created in him and the joy it created in the crowd. Palmer learned then that his father had been a wringer and that it was inevitable that he would become one, too.

He then remembers his next pigeon shoot when he was five, witnessed with his friend Dorothy. When she was told what was about to happen, she became aghast and ran away. Trying but failing to explain why this rite was proper, Palmer had run after her crying. After each successive pigeon shoot, Palmer had smelled the gun smoke on his father, and this hint of violence from his beloved father had bothered Palmer.

Then he recalls a different impression of pigeons during a trip to the city. They were not dirty, miserable creatures, rats with wings, but interesting birds. He had even seen a man feeding the

pigeons in the park. On his return home he had read the inscription on a pigeon figure that had always stood on his mantle and realized suddenly that it was a trophy his father had won at a pigeon shoot.

Why didn't they just blow up all five thousand pigeons at once if they must be destroyed, Palmer had asked his father. His father had explained that money from the event supported the playground that Palmer enjoyed so much.

Returning to the present, when he goes to bed on Friday night Palmer resolves to plead some excuse to avoid the next pigeon shoot. In the middle of the night Beans and Mutto climb into his room through the window and awaken him. Palmer dresses and goes off with them, exhilarated by dashing into the night with his friends. They head for the pigeon crates to taunt the pigeons, and suddenly Palmer's euphoria vanishes. He runs home and, pleading illness, spends that pigeon shoot day in bed.

We jump ahead to the following winter. Palmer has gotten a new sled for Christmas, but there has been no snow. He and his father playfully try to fool the weather into giving them snow. They get a blizzard, and when it stops, Palmer and his friends have a fine time sledding.

We get our first inkling of Nipper the pigeon when Palmer sees his tracks in the snow. That night a pigeon tapping on his window wakens Palmer. Despite his efforts, Palmer fails to shoo the pigeon away. On the way to school that day, Palmer and his friends throw a barrage of snowballs at Dorothy, who only turns her back to them.

The next morning the same pigeon is back tapping on Palmer's bedroom window. He scolds the bird and worries aloud what will happen when his friends find out he has a pigeon friend. He feeds it some cereal. As it eats, Palmer examines it, admiring the subtlety of its colors. When the bird returns that afternoon, Palmer is anxious to feed it so that it will stay. When he opens the window, the pigeon walks into the room and perches on Palmer's head. The pigeon takes roost for the night in the shoe box containing Palmer's soldiers.

Palmer takes a book from the library to learn more about

pigeons. Soon Nipper and the routines necessary for keeping and hiding him become the best part of Palmer's days. He begins to lie to his friends and his mother in order to keep them away from Nipper. Sometimes he taunts Dorothy as a diversion for his friends.

We learn more about Beans when the friends go to his house. That Beans does not live in a cave or lean-to but in a fine house surprises Palmer. At the house Beans shows them a frozen muskrat he is keeping in the freezer. Panther, Beans's big, mean cat, had caught it. Beans thaws the muskrat in the microwave, and they head to Dorothy's where Beans nails the carcass to the front door. Amid the ensuing hilarity amongst the friends, Mutto spots a pigeon flying over Palmer's house.

Palmer becomes increasingly attached to the pigeon. Although he knows it's dangerous for Nipper to stay in this town that hates pigeons, Palmer can't bring himself to get rid of the bird.

The abuse of Dorothy picks up as Beans keeps trying unsuccessfully to get a reaction from her. Dorothy continues to ignore them until one day she turns from Beans and confronts Palmer, asking him, "Why are you doing this to me?" Palmer realizes how hurt she has been all along and how betrayed she feels by him, not Beans. The next day Palmer walks across the street and knocks on Dorothy's door. When she appears he tells her, "I have a pigeon."

Palmer and Dorothy now retain a secret friendship. She never responds to him when the boys are around, but when they are not around, the two become good friends. Palmer makes an analogy between the way he needed to trust water in order to float on it with the way he trusts Dorothy, knowing she, like the water, will support him. He tells her that he doesn't want to become a wringer and shares his ambivalent feelings about his father. Dorothy's solution is simple. Palmer should admit that he doesn't want to be a wringer. Palmer responds by yelling at her for being a girl and not understanding.

One awful day Nipper lands on Palmer's head when he is with Beans, Mutto and Henry. Although Palmer shoos the bird away and pretends to hate it, Beans is not fooled. "The bird is

yours," he says flatly. Palmer vows then, in front of them all, that he will be the best wringer ever. Although it is warm out, Palmer wears a heavy winter coat and hat the next day, hoping that Nipper won't recognize him. That afternoon he contrives to be kept after school, but his friends wait for him. For the rest of that school year, Palmer works toward two goals: avoiding Nipper outside and keeping the guys from turning against him. As he acts up at school, others, including the gang, admire him for his craziness and unpredictability. Dorothy dubs Palmer a hero for going through all this for the pigeon.

The day after school lets out, Wringer School begins. The boys come to get Palmer. The coach explains the rules for being a wringer. He shows them, using a dummy bird, how to wring its neck. Each ten-year-old boy is to take his turn wringing the dummy bird's neck. Palmer does so, but it bothers him a lot. He shares his feelings with Dorothy.

His tenth birthday is approaching, and Dorothy wants to know if she'll be invited to the party this time. While it was easy not to invite her other years, it's very difficult now that they are friends. Palmer realizes that, with the exception of Henry, he has begun to fear more than desire that group of friends. He also learns that Beans's cat has been looking for Nipper, even getting into the house.

Dorothy does not come to the party, but the boys do, querying Palmer's father about being a sharpshooter of pigeons. They assume he hates pigeons as they do, but he says he does not hate them. When the boys insist that Palmer is now a wringer like his father, Palmer's dad says, "Palmer decides for himself. It's up to him." They search for Farquar after the party, but he's nowhere to be found. After they leave, Palmer finds a message from Henry on his birthday cake, "Tonight!"

Fearing an assault from the gang, Palmer takes Nipper and sleeps in the living room for the night. He hears yelps from outside and knows that they did come into his room. The boys have found a Nerf ball on which Dorothy has printed Nipper's name. Palmer realizes now that Henry's word on the cake was indeed meant to warn him.

The climax comes when Palmer and his friends approach Farquar for this year's Treatment. Then, at the last minute, Palmer rolls down his sleeve and refuses it. Loudly he rejects it all—The Treatment, the wringing and the nickname. He is Palmer. The others react with rage. They vow to kill Palmer and his pigeon. Palmer runs off to hide by a dumpster.

When Palmer gets home he finds Panther, Beans's cat, on his bed, looking out at Nipper through the window. Palmer knows that Nipper must go. Dorothy greets this news with tears but says she will help Palmer get rid of Nipper. They take him on their bicycles far into the country and release him. Nipper is home before they are.

The next day his mother tells Palmer that she has known about the pigeon for some time. His father has known, too. Furthermore, she says, Palmer's father's attitude about the pigeon shoot has begun to change. He not only didn't participate in last year's shoot; he didn't even go to watch. Palmer's relief is immense. He hadn't realized how alone he had felt. His mother wants him to keep Nipper, but Palmer still feels he cannot. He asks Dorothy to release Nipper at the seashore.

The boys turn all their harassment skills on Palmer. Henry is chosen to find out if Nipper is truly gone, as Palmer says. When Henry finds no trace of Nipper in Palmer's room, the other two ease up a bit on the harassment. Palmer avoids Dorothy and gets through the first half of the summer in a daze. Meanwhile, Palmer's father uses several means to show his love and support for Palmer. Palmer also notices that the golden pigeon statue is gone from the mantle.

To his own surprise, on the day of the Family Fest, Palmer decides to attend the pigeon shoot. Others assume he's a late-coming wringer and make way for him. As he watches the carnage, Dorothy appears and takes his hand, flinching at every shot. She tells Palmer that she released Nipper in the railroad yards. Palmer reacts with horror, knowing that's the place where they capture pigeons for the shoot. Palmer watches each shoot carefully, convinced that Nipper will be among the downed birds.

Suddenly, one bird escapes and flies very high, only to return and light on Palmer's head. Palmer, seeing it about to happen, moves to a clearing in the shooting field. Then Beans, grabbing the bird and heading to the middle of the field, insists that the sharpshooter take a second shot at Nipper. He slams Nipper into the dirt, but nobody fires. Clutching Nipper, Palmer leaves the field, but not before he hears a child asking if he can have a pigeon, too.

We end where we began, with a newspaper article. This one tells of this year's shoot, of the unexpected event that happened that day and the continuation of the shoot. Nothing and nobody is changed, except for a precious few.

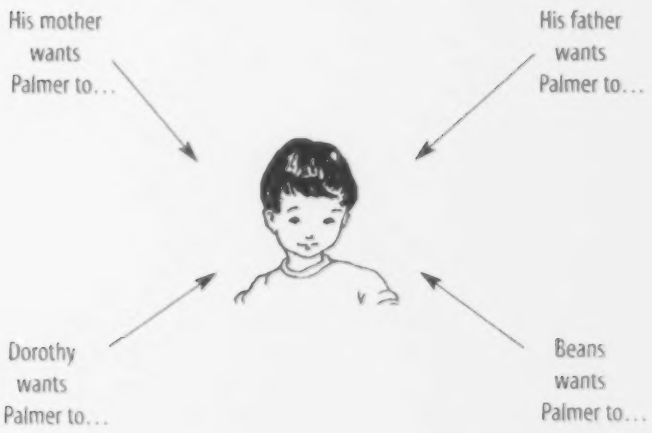
Discussions and Activities to Enhance Understanding

- Palmer has to deal with more than the tradition of killing pigeons in his town, neighborhood and family. What other traditions does he confront, and what does that reveal about Palmer and about the town?
- There are hints throughout the story about how Henry feels. What are those hints? Do students recognize them the first time?
- In the book, Dorothy suffers much abuse. Which of those abuses are because of Palmer and which would have happened anyway? Discuss what Palmer could have done at each occasion and what he did do.
- Many would call Dorothy's actions when taunted or abused by the bullies "passive resistance." What effect does this have on the boys? Discuss what they might have done if she had reacted differently. Why does Dorothy ignore them? Does it work? Ask students whether her behavior would work for them under similar circumstances of being bullied. What price would students pay for reacting that way?
- When Nipper appears, Palmer experiences conflicting emotions. List them and discuss how Palmer handles each of them.
- At one point in the story, Dorothy declares that Palmer is a hero. Is he a hero? What do students think makes a hero? Who

are their heroes? Do students include anyone on their hero list who is not famous?

- There are several acts of courage in this book. Which were the most surprising? Discuss whether students think they would have been courageous in those circumstances.
- During the dreaded Family Fest week, Palmer flashes back to other pigeon shoot days and to how his feelings about them have changed. Make a time line of those events and feelings to show the order in which they occurred.
- There are symbols throughout this story: the pigeons, The Treatment, the Nerf ball, the toy soldiers, to mention a few. Find a way for students to show what each of these means to them and to Palmer.
- Have students write about a time when they witnessed bullying and either helped the person being bullied or wished they had.
- Make a flow chart showing the action of this story and how it builds to a climax.
- In this community, the parts played by women and girls differ from those played by men and boys. Make a chart showing how their actions differ in the book.
- Read Jerry Spinelli's *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*. Can students find similarities between what really happened and what happened in *Wringer*?
- Notice how Jerry Spinelli ended the book. Ask students to write a different ending.
- Look at the values each family holds in each of the following books: *Shiloh*, *The Table Where Rich People Sit*, *The Lotus Seed* and *Wringer*. Have students write about their own family values and how they compare with these.
- Almost every character in this book wants something of Palmer. Draw a picture of Palmer in the middle of a page and arrange the names of the other characters around him. On lines going from each character to Palmer, write what that

character wants of him. The diagram might look something like this:



Thematically Related Books

Nonfiction

Spinelli, Jerry. *Knots in My Yo-Yo String*. Knopf, 1998. ISBN 0 679 88791 1.

This autobiographical work tells about growing up in Norristown, Pennsylvania, during the 1950s. Focal points include bicycles, baseball, comic books and, mostly, the neighborhood gang. They're handled with affection and a clear eye.

Picture Books

Macaulay, David. *Rome Antics*. Houghton, 1997. ISBN 0 395 82279 3.

Macaulay gives us a chance to play in and among the monuments and ancient buildings of Rome in this delightful book that shows his love and knowledge of the city. Before the title page, a woman releases a homing pigeon, and we follow that pigeon's flight as a red line through the city, getting a pigeon's-eye-view of the juxtaposition of things mundane and glorious.

Swope, Sam. *The Araboolies of Liberty Street*. Clarkson Potter, 1989. ISBN 0 517 57411 X.

Here's a whole neighborhood bullied by one man into complete conformity. Then the Araboolies move in. They don't know the rules because they don't speak the same language. The General tries to use force against them, but the neighborhood, emboldened by the Araboolies, fights back.

Novels

Hahn, Mary Downing. *Stepping on the Cracks*. Clarion, 1991. ISBN 0 395 58507 4.

Best friends Margaret and Elizabeth worry about their brothers, who are in the service during World War II. A boy who succeeds in making life miserable for them taunts them both until they find out the reasons behind his behavior.

Kinsey-Warnock, Natalie. *The Night the Bells Rang*. Cobblehill, 1991. ISBN 0 525 65074 1.

In this story set in Vermont during World War I, Aden Cutler is a bully and Mason takes the brunt of it. In turn, Mason bullies his younger brother. Then he witnesses Aden performing an act of great courage and kindness.

Slepian, Jan. *Risk n' Roses*. Scholastic, 1992. ISBN 0 590 45361 0.

Angela is vulnerable. She resents taking responsibility for her retarded sister, and she yearns for friendship and acceptance. She falls into a group dominated by Jean, a cruel and manipulative child who preys on the weaknesses of the girls in the group. Then Jean demands that Angela cut down the prize roses of an elderly friend. This is a book about peer pressure and its devastating effects.

About the Authors

Carol Otis Hurst

A former teacher and school librarian, Carol Otis Hurst is a nationally-known storyteller, language arts consultant, columnist and author of books on children's literature.

Two columns by Carol appear each month in *Teaching K–8 Magazine*: "Teaching in the Library" and "Kids' Books." She is the author of twelve professional books for teachers, several of which are published by SRA/McGraw, and is one of three major authors of the DLM Early Childhood Program, which has been widely adopted in preschools and kindergartens in the United States and Canada. Three recent books by Carol Otis Hurst have been published by Linworth Publishers. They are *Using Picture Books in the Upper Grades; Using Literature in the Middle School Curriculum;* and *Open Books: A Guide to Literature in the Early Grades*. She is also the co-author of *Friends and Relations: Using Literature with Social Themes K–2*.

Carol is the mother of two daughters and the grandmother of two grandsons. She currently lives in Westfield, Massachusetts.

Rebecca Otis

Rebecca Otis is the co-author of several books for teachers, including *In Times Past: An Encyclopedia for Integrating U.S. History with Literature in Grades 3–8; Picturing Math: Using Picture Books in the Math Curriculum; Using Literature in the Middle School Curriculum;* and *Friends and Relations: Using Literature with Social Themes K–2*. She's the webmaster of "Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Site," which you can find at http://www.carolhurst.com, and she publishes the quarterly *Carol Hurst's Children's Literature Newsletter*.

Rebecca, who is Carol's daughter and the mother of two boys, lives in Colrain, Massachusetts.

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for enhancing understanding
Suggestions and techniques
for facilitating in-depth discussions
An annotated list of thematically-related books

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